

## The Looking Glass : New Perspectives on Children's Literature, Vol 18, No 1 (2015)

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# *Emerging Voices*

*David Beagley, editor*

## **Australia's forgotten fairy tale: Alan Marshall's *Whispering in the Wind*.**

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'**A GIANT** in Australian children's literature' was the assessment Paul Jennings made of Alan Marshall (1902-1984) during an ABC Radio National program broadcast to celebrate the centenary of Marshall's birth. However, the fairly lengthy memorial program concluded without a single mention of either *Whispering in the Wind* (1969) or *Fight for Life* (1972), Marshall's two novels for children. Jennings' evaluation of Marshall's contribution to Australian children's literature, it seems, was based on the impact and longevity of a book that was not explicitly crafted for a child audience, but for readers of all ages. It was the 1955 memoir *I Can Jump Puddles*, the first volume of Marshall's three-part 'fictionalised' (McLaren, n.p.) autobiography, a work that earned its reputation as a children's book through its focus on Marshall's experiences as polio-affected child and adolescent. *I Can Jump Puddles*, for many years a common text book set for Australian upper primary and secondary students, was in 2013 republished as part of Penguin's artfully illustrated and produced Australian Children's Classics series. But despite the resurgence of interest in 'classic' Australian children's writing that is evidenced by the Penguin enterprise (as well as by the Text Classics series, which includes a number of children's titles), the books that Marshall did intend for a young readership have thus far been overlooked for repackaging and re-introduction to a contemporary audience.

This paper concerns the first of those two works of children's fiction, *Whispering in the Wind*, a book that has a curious history of being overlooked. When Marshall released this 'space age fairy tale' (Marks, 314) into the 'moon-mad' (Marshall, 'What Happened to "Whispering"?' 78) world of 1969, he had every expectation that the book would be warmly received. He posted a copy of the book to astronaut Buzz Aldrin, who read it and wrote back to the author the kind of kind, funny letter that Marshall thought would be a publicist's dream. But despite Marshall's solid reputation in Australian literary circles, and despite the book's endorsement by a major celebrity of the period, *Whispering in the Wind* somehow failed to make a significant impact. Marshall was never one for complaint or self-pity; his signature traits were the optimism and

resilience that had enabled him to overcome restrictions of his polio-related disabilities, and, as a young writer, to battle through the rejection slips until he at last achieved publication. And yet, he placed on the public record his bewildered regret at the flat response to *Whispering in the Wind* by the gatekeepers of Australian literary scene:

Now it was queer, when the book came out, there seemed to be a general agreement to ignore it. It was never mentioned anywhere, it was reviewed until ages afterwards. I wondered if I'd dreamt the whole thing. There was a Children's Book Week, but I was told that my book was never on any of the stands. Every year there's a prize for the best Australian children's book, with a long list of runners-up and comments about them: not a word about mine. (Marshall, 'What Happened to "Whispering"?' 78)

Marshall's recollections are not entirely accurate, since the book was certainly reviewed in the *Age* and *Canberra Times* in the year of its release, and positively, too. Nevertheless, the book failed to catch on and find its way to a broad audience. Instead it lapsed out of print, and other than a re-issue under the Puffin imprint in 1980, it has remained so ever since. *Whispering in the Wind* has largely evaded critical attention, too; most traces of scholarly interest in the novel refer to its status as a book that was approved for translation and dissemination in communist East Germany where publishers (in the course of applying for a permit to publish the work) argued for the appropriateness of its sturdy 'proletarian' (quoted in Thomson-Wohlgemuth n.p.) values and its spirit of optimism. Here, however, I'd like to consider *Whispering in the Wind* within its local context, from a 21st century viewpoint, and with a particular focus on the work's status as a 'transported tale': a story that imports traditional European characters and structures into an unfamiliar — in this case, Australian — setting.

*Whispering in the Wind* was originally published by Thomas Nelson Australia as a 165-page illustrated chapter book for an upper primary audience. The novel began to take shape in Marshall's mind in the early 1960s during an extended journey through the eastern European countries that provided him with a large audience for his work (writer John Embling insisted, in conversation with Jennings and Ramona Koval on ABC Radio National, that Marshall's overseas sales were literally in the 'millions'). In Russia, Marshall met writer and scholar Samuil Marshak who advanced the opinion that Marshall — who was aged in his 60s — was by now mature enough to write for children. Marshall recalled, '[h]e didn't like our idea of writing for children to start off, then advancing to write for adults; he thought it should be the other way around' ('What Happened to "Whispering"?' 77). Marshall determined to write a fairy tale, 'with witches and elves and dragons all mixed up in an Australian setting' (77), with an element of space travel thrown in for contemporary relevance. While Lisa Fiander boldly states that '[f]airy tales are everywhere in Australian fiction' (157), her discussion is confined to adult fiction, where indeed she finds evidence of a fairy tale motifs and structures being richly employed, most especially in fictions that interrogate issues of cultural anxiety (identity in Canadian fiction, disturbing and alienating landscapes in Australian). Australian children's fiction, on the other hand, has not traditionally been rich in adapted folk and fairy tale. In recommending *Whispering in the Wind* to contemporary child readers, the New South Wales Association for Gifted & Talented Children give the accurate summation that Marshall's novel is 'a rarity in Australian children's literature — a fantasy that invokes images and characters unique to the Australian landscape' (n.p.).

In her sketch of the history of the adaptation of European fairy tales to Australian settings, Rebecca-Anne do Rozario describes an extended period during which the fairy tale in Australia remained trapped in a 'colonial time warp, dominated by koala-hugging, girlish fairies and plump cherubs in gum-tree foliage' (13). She argues convincingly that it is only in very recent decades that the fairy tale in Australia has begun to mature, and she takes as a central example of this maturation Shaun Tan and John Marsden's dystopian fairy tale *The Rabbits* (2000), which pulls no punches in its approach to colonial impact, an aspect of Australian history that has often been elided or sanitized in Australian children's literature. It's tempting to propose *Whispering in the Wind* a midpoint between the colonial time-warp and do Rozario's proposed emergent strain of Australian fairy tale. But Marshall's text, with its evidence of entrenched colonial modes of thinking, probably reaches back to the time-warp more than it strives forwards to a confrontational work such as *The Rabbits*. However, it does sit somewhere on the continuum between the extremes, representing an important attempt to provide for young Australian readers a rollicking fairy tale quest narrative featuring stock characters adapted for adventure in a recognizable, local setting.

'[W]itches, elves, dragons' were the kinds of characters Marshall initially had in mind, but in the completed *Whispering in the Wind*, the elves fail to make an appearance. Although one 'dragon'

appears, it has been transformed into the Bunyip of Australian mythology, and Marshall has his creature spurt water instead of fire from its ominous nostrils. Marshall's Pale Witch — with her pointed hat, black robes and broom — has been fairly seamlessly transposed from the popular culture standard; her point of difference is that she rides her broom as far afield as the moon where she collects space junk and avails herself of left-behind camera equipment. Although Marshall originally thought the hero of the novel would be a silver-tongued stockman called Crooked Mick, he eventually relegated Mick to the status of a minor character and created as his protagonist a young seeker-hero, Peter. Peter's companion on his quest is the kangaroo Greyfur. Described by a reviewer for the *Age* newspaper as 'Peter's wizard' (quoted in Marks, 319), Greyfur has a magical pouch from which she can pull anything that might be required, from a meal to an elephant, a table and chairs to an iconic Australian wharfie and his crane. Among *Whispering's* most endearing features are a quirky sense of humour and a deep feel for the Australian idiom. The novel's humour shows up in vernacular characterisation and wordplay. For example, the 'Willy Willy Man' is a cyclonic creature named for a small bush tornado; in Marshall's book, he operates on two-stroke engine fuel. When a storm brews in the kitchen of the Jarrah Giant (named for a towering species of gum tree common in Western Australian forests), the giant introduces his own personal 'lightning conductor', a tall man illustrated with a tailcoat and baton.

Marshall's fairy tale begins commonly enough with a call to adventure from a mentor/donor figure, in this instance the South Wind, who wishes to employ Peter and his fleet-footed pony, Moonlight. But when Peter tells the South Wind that his heart's desire is to rescue a beautiful princess from a dragon, the South Wind uses his speed and presence to sweep the land and discover the location of the last remaining princess. Additionally, in true fairy tale donor style, he gives to Peter a most important gift: the 'Magic Leaf', which comes in a pouch, and which — like Norman Lindsay's Magic Pudding — is eternally renewable. When given away, the leaf has the power to make the fearful brave, the unkind kind, the suspicious trusting. Says the South Wind: 'It means, "You are loved; you are needed."' (*Whispering in the Wind*, 7). Peter bestows a Magic Leaf upon just about every character he encounters, whether friend or foe. With each instance of giving, Peter is gradually transformed — through the magical acquisition of items of noble garb — into a prince.

The effect of the leaf is swift and unobtrusive. Each character who receives it is blessed immediately with an internal radiance: '[i]t was as if the sun had come out from the shadows within her and was now resting in her eyes' (23); 'her hideous face had changed and was now touched with compassion and kindness' (50); '[y]ou could see that great changes were taking place inside his grotesque head, and he looked round him as if something had happened to his surroundings' (97). These transactions and transformations comprise the didactic core of the novel, underlining over and over again the rewards of love, kindness and compassion. The Magic Leaf also functions as a great leveller, turning Peter into a princely figure, while at the same time bringing down to earth a greedy king. But when Peter at last wins the hand of the beautiful princess, rather than installing himself in the castle, he takes his lady back to his rough, tumble-down shack, where they plan to enjoy grilling chops over the coals of an open fire. Egalitarian and non-hierarchical behaviours are clearly privileged, both in the way the plot is resolved, and in the inherent function of the Magic Leaf. But sometime after the publication of the book, Marshall came to suspect that it was the Magic Leaf that had led to *Whispering in the Wind* being considered out of step with prevailing philosophical and educational beliefs of its day. He heard a rumour that 'some committee had seen *Whispering* but the report said it would be bad for kids, to make them believe a magic leaf would solve their problems' ('What happened to "Whispering"?' 78). It's not difficult to imagine that a Magic Leaf with levelling powers, together with Marshall's left wing politics, his connections to (though never membership of) the Australian Communist Party, and his popularity in Eastern Bloc countries, might have been sufficient to kindle suspicion of *Whispering in the Wind* in some quarters of the literary establishment.

So *Whispering in the Wind*, for whatever reason, or whatever confluence of reasons, has never acquired a place in the Australian children's literary canon. But while the book has never had the broad audience it might easily have found, it certainly did have appreciative readers. Marshall recorded that he received many letters from children who had read and loved *Whispering in the Wind* ('What Happened to "Whispering"?' 78), and today on the internet can be found traces of the book's impact on those who encountered it years earlier. On the reading and book recommendation site Goodreads, *Whispering in the Wind*, which has been out of print since 1980, has 22 ratings with an average star rating of 4.41. Readers' comments on the book, which are both passionate and nostalgic in tone, almost all lament the book's low profile and lack of availability.

Embling has described Alan Marshall as a 'victim of the 1960s', a writer whose work came to seem dated in contrast to the emerging practitioners of the 'New Left' and the 'New Wave'. Stephen Murray-Smith noted something similar in 1974, ten years before Marshall's death, when he commented that Marshall had been 'punished' for being neither 'pretentious', 'trendy', nor 'self-consciously folksy'; Murray-Smith said that he would be 'very surprised if Alan Marshall's creative reputation does not bloom very considerably over the next fifty years, as his deceptively concealed powers become more accessible to investigation' (quoted in Marks, 343). But if Marshall's reputation as an artist was curtailed by the cultural politics and tastes of the 1960s, there are now securely entrenched cultural conditions and sensitivities around the representation of indigenous Australians and the ongoing impact of colonialism that might make unlikely a re-appreciation of a book like *Whispering in Wind*, despite the novel's evident narrative-based appeal.

Do Rozario has charted the progression of two different methods of populating Australia with fairy tale: one involved importing fairies from Europe and installing them in the exotic Australian landscape, and the other involved the Grimm-like collection and publication of indigenous Australian folklore. In his career, Marshall was involved in both these traditions. Over the course of many years, Marshall forthrightly wrote and spoke up about the living conditions of indigenous Australians, and in the late 1940s spent a period of time living in Arnhemland where he collected the stories that appeared in his 1952 book *People of the Dreamtime*. Then, in writing *Whispering in the Wind*, he quite deliberately set out to create a fairy tale that was located 'in an Australian bush setting'? (What Happened to "Whispering"?' 77). Perhaps it's worth observing that Marshall did not say he wanted to set his tale *in Australia*, but 'in an Australian bush setting'. Certainly the fantasy genre allows room to read the land of *Whispering in the Wind* as a parallel version of Australia, one with a history altered and adjusted for the reader's comfort and entertainment. Even so, *Whispering in the Wind* provides an almost perfect test case for observing the difficulties that Australian authors have faced, and the awkward manoeuvres that Australian authors have made, when attempting to interpolate the European folkloric tradition into any version — realist or fantasy — of the Australian landscape.

The novel begins with a statement of location and a reorganisation of time. 'Once upon a time, *long long ago*, beyond the Tin Shed and on the other side of the Black Stump, there lived an old man and a little boy' (1, my italics). It is long, long ago, yet the man is a stockman, and this version of Australia is already populated with non-indigenous features such as horses and stock and tin sheds. There is an attempt here, then, to displace into the 'once upon a time' of European fairy tale, while retaining familiar and relatively contemporary features of this young, settler nation. It is difficult not to read the opening of *Whispering in the Wind* as sleight of hand that attempts to elongate colonial time, and to deepen (and possibly attempt to legitimise) the roots of white Australia.

Children's literature is not, generally, and has not been, historically, seen as an appropriate site for the investigation of difficult truths. As Clare Bradford notes in *Reading Race*, children's texts are caught up in the problem of finding 'some way to "manage" the colonial past for child readers — whether they are assumed to be white, black or both — to obscure the violent origins of the contemporary nation' (15). Bradford argues that a common approach to this problem, in the first half of the 20th century at least, was to deploy 'strategies of silence and concealment' (15). Marshall's management strategy, in this book from 1969, is partially spatial one. He does not ignore Aboriginal Australia, but attempts to compartmentalise it. This is his method of sidestepping issues that both writer and publisher would most likely have assumed were out of place in a rollicking, optimistic, entertaining book for children.

As is the case with many children's books, the paratextual material of *Whispering in the Wind* includes a map. The 1969 edition of the book was a hard back, and the maps appear on the endpapers, front and back. A dotted line takes Peter from Crooked Mick's hut in an arching journey past the Old Red Gum, through the Plain of Clutching grass, past the Giant's Castle and the hut of the Pale Witch through the Lonely Desert, the Watchful Forest and past the Oldest Tree in the world to the Castle of the Princess. In the untravelled heart of this semi-circular journey are illustrated three figures: an Aboriginal man with his spear, and two Aboriginal children standing beneath a waterfall. But despite the centrality of these figures in the end-paper maps, Aboriginal people play a very minor part in this narrative. The illustration directly references a very short scene in the first chapter of the novel: the only scene in which Aboriginal people are seen or heard to speak. They do not, however, speak or appear directly. Rather, they appear at one remove, their words and actions related in the spoken narration of the South Wind. When Peter asks the South Wind where he might find a beautiful princess to rescue, the South Wind — in a move reminiscent of Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* — dashes away and returns in an impossibly short period of time, having covered a vast distance. During his short absence he has 'swept into the land of the aborigines' (5). The Aboriginal man

with the spear tells him that beautiful princesses 'lived in the Dreaming Time of my people', but were all transformed into birds; 'there are none left in all Australia except one; she is the prisoner of a selfish King and is guarded by a Bunyip' (6). Marshall thus effects a semantic separation between land in which Peter lives with Crooked Mick in his Tin Shed, and the 'land of the aborigines' (5) into which the South Wind blows in order to obtain the wise counsel of the fish-spearing father. Marshall ascribes to the Aboriginal man ultimate wisdom. Nevertheless, he cordons him off in the 'land of aborigines' which is separate from the version of Australia, populated with white and postcolonial figures, in which Peter will conduct his adventures.

Setting, as Joyce Thomas notes, is a crucial element of Western literature generally and of children's literature particularly. She argues that although fairy tales are situated in a 'timeless, spaceless, quasimythic sphere — that familiar "once upon a time" — it nonetheless has settings which serve crucial functions for countless tales' (126). Despite the apparent timelessness and spacelessness of traditional European fairy tale settings, they are still notably *not* Australian. This un-Australianness is evidenced not only by the appearance of non-Australian animal characters, but also, I would argue, by an unspoken understanding that the human characters of fairy tales are also endemic to their environment. Implicit in the traditional fairy tale is the understanding that the human and animal characters of the tales have a long, unquestioned and unbroken connection to place, and that this connection extends outwards to the reader. Read in a European context, the long ago heroes and heroines of fairy tale could be the reader's ancestors. In Australia, however, things are different. To invoke 'long long ago' in a young nation whose history is broken into two utterly unlike components by a cataclysmic event, is immediately to raise the question: before or after?

More awkwardness surrounds the narrative set-up for the character of the 'beautiful princess'. Marshall requires of his readers a significant suspension of disbelief in the way he establishes the existence of a single, remaining beautiful princess in the land. As seen in the quotation above, the Aboriginal man tells the South Wind that beautiful princesses lived in the 'Dreaming Time' of his people, but were all turned to birds. I wonder what the chances are that these beautiful princesses, transformed into birds either during or after this 'Dreaming Time', were possessed of long fair hair that grew down to their waists? It is not only Jack Newnham's illustrations of *Whispering in the Wind's* beautiful princess that convince us that she is white; Marshall's text also makes explicit mention of her fair hair, thus buying into the traditional fairy tale association between fair hair and personal qualities of goodness, mildness and kindness. Like Peter, the reader hears of the princess in Chapter One, but does not see her until Chapter Fourteen. In her first live appearance, she recalls Disney's princess, Snow White: a friend to all living things, so much the better if they are cute. *Whispering's* princess is introduced through an passage that situates her in an rural idyll, an extended riff redolent with Australiana. Marshall's is a deeply mid-20th century version Australiana: a blend of the endemic and the exotic. In the princess's chamber:

Two pet rabbits chased each other round the carpet. Swallows had built their mud nests high up near the ceiling... On top of the bookshelves a possum was curled up sleeping beside a bowl of wild-flowers. A Maltese terrier looking like a woolly rug lay asleep on a couch. Seated at a table in the centre of the room was the most beautiful girl Peter had ever seen. She had long fair hair that hung almost to her waist and framed her face in two golden curves.... The grey thrush, pecking crumbs on the window-sill, tried to sing her beauty but it was greater than his clear notes could match. Even the wild swans stringing across the evening sky were not as beautiful as she, nor were the shy orchids that danced in the moonlight when the wind stirred (110-111).

The princess, we learn, is called 'Lowana', which she tells Peter is an aboriginal name meaning 'first daughter': a further example of what I take to be Marshall's attempt to incorporate and honour indigenous Australia in a text that in every other way elides, silences, compartmentalises and sidelines it. You have to admire his brio.

Although *Whispering in the Wind* is a gem of Australian children's writing, contemporary readers and literary gatekeepers may take issue with the colonial habits of thought implicit in its creation. The Aboriginal people that the book ever so briefly depicts are not from a living, vibrant, ongoing culture, but from a relegated, compartmentalised past. They are wise, they are admirable, but they exist in another realm from the hero Peter, his mentor Crooked Mick, and the beautiful, blonde princess with the Aboriginal name. 'Setting more than mere background,' says John Stephens. Rather, it 'implicates attitude and ideology' (209). To set a fairy tale in Australia, or even a mythologised version of Australia, is to call attention in a very particular

way to place and time. It necessarily stirs up a history, which — if presented honestly — is not the stuff of entertainment and reassurance, but quite the opposite.

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