
*All the Birds, Singing* is the story of Jake Whyte, a woman who escapes a traumatic and mysterious past in Australia’s rugged outback to live in self-imposed isolation tending sheep on a rain and windswept English island. *All the Bird’s, Singing* won the Miles Franklin Award in 2014. It also won the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize (2014), the European Union Prize for Literature (2014) and the Encore Award (2014). It is Evie Wyld’s second novel.

*All the Bird’s is, at its heart, a ghost story, with obvious Gothic elements. Jake, the central character, is both possessive of and possessed by her past, a possession manifested as spiritual and embodied trauma throughout the novel. She suffers at the hands of a tyrannical masculine oppressor, Otto; develops an atypically non-sexual love interest; lives in a seemingly haunted house; and is terrorised by a mysterious being which slaughters her sheep.

The novel’s opening lines establish a ferocity with which the rest of the novel is rendered:

> Another sheep, mangled and bled out, her innards not yet crustling and the vapours rising from her like a steamed pudding. Crows, their beaks shining, strutting and rasping, and when I waved my stick they flew to the trees and watched, flaring out their wings, singing, if you could call it that. I shoved my boot in Dog’s face to stop him from taking a string of her away with him as a souvenir…(p. 1)

The sheer energy of Wyld’s prose propels the reader forward, particularly in the passages set in Australia. Like the mist that perpetually shrouds the unnamed island, the passages set in England are often caliginous; this seems purposeful, however, as Wyld offsets each of these passages with increasingly intense depictions of a brutal and horrific past on another continent.

Wyld deftly weaves the forward trajectory of the present, in England, with an inverted journey into the past, in Australia. The mysterious slayings of Jake’s sheep in the present always coincide with the revelation of an equally gruesome remembered experience; the haunting spectre of Jake’s past manifests itself in a psychological dissolution in the present.

> The room settled and I counted the heartbeats…And then the sound like someone driving a car into a tree, a crack and a slam that echoed, and then like hands slapping fast on the wall…Dog snapped at the air around him like it was full of flies…I lumped off the bed and hit the light switch. The door was now open, flush with the wall like someone had stood there, blocking the doorway, observing. The corridor beyond it was darker and longer than I remembered it. (p. 22)
As with any ghost story, one suspends disbelief, allowing for a reality in which haunted houses do exist and demons materialise from the misty hills of a suitably remote English island. One dismisses the emergence of a mysterious stranger whose appearance coincides with the heroine’s traumatic past baying at the barn door. However, this past is anything but a ghost story; it’s visceral, raw and bloody and it’s from this juxtaposition of setting that the novel draws its power.

The passages set in Australia are written with an immediateness that punches off the page. Wyld’s prose is distinctly masculine and there’s a definite play on preconceptions of gendered identity in the text, most obviously naming her main character Jake and giving her the traditionally male-dominated occupation of sheep-shearing. The dialogue is sharp, direct and peppered with expletives. At times, though, this feels a bit obvious.

The Australian characters are quite...‘Australian’ – in a mono-dimensional, red dirt and work boots kind of way. Wyld’s Australia is hot, dusty and dry, full of rough people and rough country that all add up to a rough life. Unfortunately, she paints the landscape with all too familiar (and stereotypical) a brush. And it’s in this landscape that it becomes difficult to suspend one’s disbelief, even for a ghost story.

Wyld treks her shearing team across a vast distance of Western Australia’s pastoral country and the distance itself is historically excessive. She ends her shearing ‘route’ at Boondarie Station in Hedland, which, although at its origins was a sheep station, is now owned by mining giant BHP Billiton and is leased for running cattle. The time setting of the novel is questionable and could be set any time from 1992 onwards, which makes determining the factual accuracy of certain topographical and cultural details (like the now dwindling sex trade in Kalgoorlie) difficult.

All the Bird’s, Singing is a powerful and evocative story, and perhaps it’s a tale strong enough to push the reader past the factual inaccuracies and cultural stereotypes. It’s a fast-paced read, recommended to anyone with a soft spot for a touch of the Gothic, hot sweeping landscapes and sheep.

Heather Delfs, The University of Western Australia

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2 Otto references the New Zealand television show Shortland Street, which began airing in 1992 and is still a prime-time television show in NZ. (p. 113)