

WORLD OF ELSEWHERE

Marele Day

'If you don't behave yourself, you'll be sent to boarding school.' Oh, what promise I saw in that threat! No parents, endless midnight snacks, capers and escapades, climbing over the school wall and being caught out by the tide. Just the way it was in the *Girl's Own* annuals. The grounds were kept in impeccable order by a trusty old gardener in shirt sleeves. In spring, hosts of golden daffodils pushed up through the grass. There were no daffodils in the grass outside my window. They would never be able to push their way up through our thick mat of kikuyu. And no one ever got stranded by the tide at Bondi or Manly. A rip yes, but not the tide.

It did bother me a little that this world was not the one outside the window. But it was written down in a book - it was real. Closer to home I read the adventures of Blinky Bill and Snugglepoot and Cuddlepoot. But there was something not quite right about that either. On our itchy camping holidays to various sandfly breeding grounds throughout Australia, I never once came across any flora or fauna that could talk, much less a koala wearing knickerbockers. Perhaps deep, deep in the Australian bush ...

When I was eleven my cousin went 'overseas' on the Fairsky. The ship was huge - bigger than a block of flats. Circular Quay was a mass of paper streamers, high hopes, nervousness, excited chatter and sensible parental advice about clean underwear, keeping traveller's cheques in a safe place, never letting your passport out of your sight: 'Even when you're swimming, wear it in a plastic bag tied around your waist.'

We found our way to the cramped, stuffy cabin on D deck that my cousin was sharing with three other girls. Heaven. Adventures, midnight snacks, giggling in the dorms and no parents. A floating boarding school.

Six weeks to Southampton, stopping at Tahiti, Bilbao, Panama Canal, Curacao, Lisbon. I murmured the names over and over until the paper streamers broke and my cousin sailed away. As soon as we got home I found a book with those names in it - the atlas. No more Blinky Bill or Head Girl adventures; the atlas was the book I pored over when I was supposed to be doing my homework, which went unremarked because to anyone else it looked like homework. I planned journeys that included names that sung with allure - dry, sandy Samarkand; sun-drenched Madrid. Vladivostok had the kick of chilled vodka; red and green Tierra del Fuego was a pleasure trip for the tongue.

Ten years later I found myself in the place of my dreams - a cramped stuffy cabin on the Fairsky (even more cramped and stuffy after five weeks of it). We disembarked in Lisbon on a cold, grey February morning. I distinctly remember standing on the dock with a suitcase full of evening dresses I'd never wear again and saying to my friend, 'What do we do now?'

We found a pension. We didn't speak Portuguese and they didn't speak English, but it soon became obvious that the pension wanted our passports. We shook our heads fiercely. Absolutely not. No way. Eventually the police had to come to explain that it was customary for the pension to keep guests' passports for the duration of the stay. We looked at each other

and did what we had to do. The first day overseas and here we were relinquishing our passports. All the other parental advice quickly followed suit. We were on our way.

I don't recall exactly where I saw the first daffodils pushing up through the grass but I knew then that the country the books were about existed. It was at Sandymount, Dublin, that I saw the tide come in. Quickly, suddenly, the way evening falls in Australia (those long drawn-out evenings of childhood books had been another source of perplexity). The grey sea lapped in until the bay was full of it. If this was possible, then all things were.

The country the books were about is a country both real and imagined. It is a place of adventure and discovery, whose plausibility convinces us of its existence. Children are literalists: if they are told something, they believe it to be literally true. We need to have faith in words because they map the world for us. My parents' threat of boarding school would have carried no weight if boarding school was only a pretend place. The world beyond our backyard, the world of elsewhere, was the place I longed to see. Elsewhere could be literally another country or a place in a writer's imagination.

I started writing while travelling. Apart from being a way of talking to myself, of hearing my own language in foreign surroundings, it gave me snapshots of the place. I used words to take photos. My first piece of writing was a poem that began: 'Spring dotting the grass like Claude Monet' - suspiciously like daffodils pushing up through the grass. It was to document the things I was seeing, but of course sometimes words create their own shapes as well.

Years later, and a lot of water under the prow, I turned to crime writing. I chose crime because I felt it was a good vehicle to write about place. This time the place was my own backyard - Sydney. The private detective is a creature of the city, our guide to it. So in one sense the plots of the Claudia Valentine novels are just an elaborate excuse for a travelogue, for presenting views of the city that you see and the city that you don't see. Home, too, could be an adventurous, exciting place. All you had to do was make it up. Which is what, I realised, the writers of the childhood books had done.

They had taken their everyday world of spring and tides and set stories there, overlaying on to the real world a fictional one that was more intense, more colourful. The country that books are about can be both home and elsewhere, a place where the real and the imagined coincide.

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Marele Day contributes to numerous anthologies, is the editor of How to Write Crime and has written a guide, Successful Promotion for Writers. She is author of the Claudia Valentine mysteries, including the winner of the American Shamus Award, The Last Tango of Dolores Delgado. Her bestselling literary novel, Lambs of God, was published to high acclaim, and film rights sold to Twentieth Century Fox, with Winona Ryder starring and co-producing. Marele has taught Creative Writing courses, and conducts writing-related workshops throughout Australia.

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