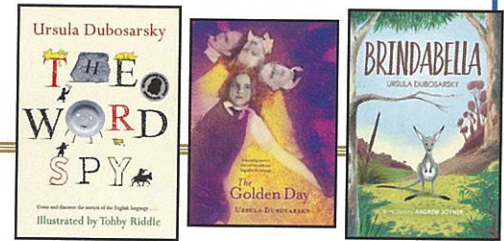
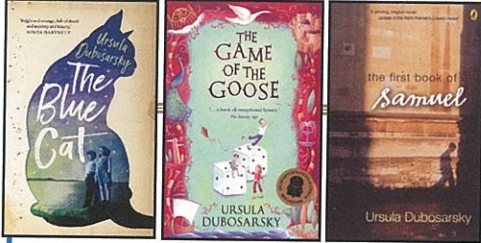


KNOW *the* AUTHOR

URSULA DUBOSARSKY

interviewed by Tali Lavi



Ursula Dubosarsky is a masterful storyteller. Her work can be playful or haunting and sometimes channels both moods at once. Her stories are often populated by landscapes of strange wonder rendered so in exquisitely wrought language. The breadth of tone stretches from considerably literary — reading these novels are to know you are reading contemporary classics — to jaunty adventures with rhyme and wordplay. She has been recognised both internationally, with nominations for The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (every year from 2013-2017) and a nomination for the Hans Christian Andersen Award (2016), and locally, with numerous awards (including nine Premier's Literary Awards). Such impressive credentials, along with others such as her study of ancient languages (Old Icelandic, Latin, Greek and Hebrew), might lead one to expect a rather intimidating personage but on meeting her the only hint at this, besides her evident intellect, is Ursula's physically tall stature. The writer radiates thoughtfulness and generosity. One can almost feel the other worlds brimming inside her along with her receptiveness to the world around her, both past and present.

Ursula has written over sixty books, encompassing picture books, novels and non-fiction (the scope of this profile focuses primarily on selected works from 2003 onwards, her last interview for *Magpies*). Whilst the desire to become a writer became apparent from the age of six, the age she learnt to read, she discloses that it was a *secret ambition*. She was, however, encouraged in her writing. *I was very excited on my twelfth birthday when my parents gave me a second-hand typewriter*. Ursula's home was one where books *were the most important thing in the house*. Stories had currency; presents were often books. Worlds filled with stories, libraries, were *like second homes to all the family*. *When I was old enough to get to the library on the bus by myself I went every Saturday morning*.

The writer reveals that she is *always reading* but will avoid reading certain writers she admires whilst working on a book of her own. Ursula refers, at various times, to the idea of a *writer's fingerprint*: that *you can only write what you write*. A reader of her novels might be forgiven for thinking that she has a distinctive voice that is

characterised by intensity of language and subject (*Abyssinia*, *Theodora's Gift*, *The Red Shoe*, *The Golden Day*, *Brindabella*) but that would overlook her other stories that are light and playful (*One Little Goat*, *The Terrible Plop*, *Tim and Ed*, *How to Be a Great Detective*, *The Isador Brown* adventure series and *The Cryptic Casebook of Coco Carlomagno (and Alberta)* series). She is a polyphonic writer, straddling the comic and the dramatic with equal success.

Ursula lives in Sydney with her family but I witnessed her conduct several workshops with school children in Melbourne that revolved around *The Blue Cat* (Allen & Unwin, 2017) and how this story, with its surreal elements, came about. One of its inspirations was her mother's experience of having a Jewish refugee child arrive at her convent school during World War II, in a Sydney that was at that time a largely Anglicised environment. In her novel, the idea of this child was transformed into Ellery, a German Jewish refugee who has escaped with his father but not his mother; she is dead. The horror of this fact plays upon the imagination of Columba and the people around her. Ellery, whose name has

been Anglicised, is noticeably other; he does not speak English and his skin is *very white ... like a doll*. This felt like a clever subversion of stories of Australian first encounters between Indigenous Australians and white settlers where the inhabitants thought these fair-skinned beings to be ghosts. Here, Ellery stands out for his whiteness amongst white Australians and he acts as a kind of ghost for his presence evokes the spectre of the Holocaust. The blue cat that haunts the novel is an unsettling, sometimes malevolent presence. When Ursula talked about this to the school children, she was visibly affected.

The writer has previously addressed the Holocaust in her work. Her novels **The First Book of Samuel** (Penguin, 1995) and its sequel **Theodora's Gift** (Penguin, 2005) weave life and death into a radiant tale that is astonishing for its originality and the joyfulness that sits alongside its emotional weight. Ursula's experience of this particular historical event is informed by her warm friendship with Yehuda Artzi who taught her Hebrew when she stayed at a kibbutz in her twenties. She still feels great fondness for him. The dedication in **The First Book of Samuel** is to him: *teacher, poet, dearest friend*. Ursula relates that when Yehuda taught her, despite her homework being rendered in *primitive sentences*, he would tell her that *she was born to be a writer*. Born in Munich but having managed to escape Germany for Palestine before the war, Ursula adopted Yehuda's story into Samuel's beloved grandfather Elias's childhood. They corresponded for some years until Yehuda's death and she recounts *the only way he knew that his mother, grandfather and stepfather were dead was because the letters stopped coming*. The horror of this experience resonates through our correspondence and these stories of hers.

As with books that have preceded it, **The Blue Cat** makes use of fragments of the past — including references to the **Aeneid**, the Bible and documents of the time — although it does so in a different manner, reminiscent of the style of German writer W. G. Sebald. One of the visual images interspersed through the novel is a news article from **The Schoolboys' Chronicle** entitled *Why You Should Buy War-Saving Certificates*. It is an impassioned rejoinder to its readers which opens dramatically with, *Today the Empire is in deadly peril*. Ursula's individual past intersects with the story; for the writer of this article is her father Peter Coleman who was eleven years of age at the time. It communicates the heightened

feelings of wartime whilst demonstrating a sophisticated use of rhetoric.

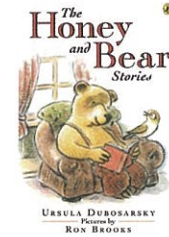
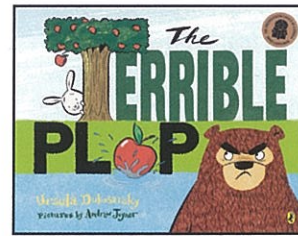
Abyssinia (Penguin, 2003), a novel steeped in the uncanny, is structured as a Russian doll of worlds; the reader is never sure which one opens into that of the human, rather than the dolls', reality. At one point one of the characters, Sarah, *feels a terrible uncertainty, not only about that but about everything. Where she was, who she was, even, and what was happening. She had a feeling of nothing ... There was nothing*. It begins with a fictional gazette inspired by the *childhoods of Nina and Kathleen Rouse* who lived in the late nineteenth century. Ursula came across their dolls' house and subsequently learned of their intriguingly constructed magical world and invented newspaper. The story of Mathilda and her family in **The Red Shoe** (Allen & Unwin, 2006), set over a period of three weeks in April 1954 — with the dramatic backdrop of the Petrov Affair and the polio epidemic playing out simultaneously — is framed by newspaper articles from the time.

When asked about this technique of incorporating different visual media or forms of text, Ursula responds,

*It is, I suppose, to do with different ways of presenting reality — a newspaper is a kind of 'official' reported reality, and then there is private experience which is something else again. Again, it's the hidden life behind the overt statements. I'm sometimes asked if the newspaper excerpts in **The Red Shoe** are true or did I make them up — rest assured they are all true! It is an uncanny and as you say a Sebaldian feeling when writing these sorts of books, the way the life of the invented novel seems to become reflected disconcertingly in the pages of actual newsprint...*

The hidden life encapsulates an essential truth about Ursula's novels with their undercurrents of life as an inscrutable mystery holding both beauty and tragedy. When asked what underpins this belief, she responds, *what comes to mind is that beautiful biblical phrase, 'for now we see through a glass darkly'. We are trying to see something, but there's not enough light around — we can only see shadows and shining things*.

Mathilda's life in **The Red Shoe** is one marked by secrets. There are secrets of her own: she has ambitions of becoming a spy and begins to survey her mysterious neighbours; she knows the old man across the road has a gun; she has an imaginary



friend, the cutting Floreal. Life is filled with uncertainty; her eldest sister Elizabeth has suffered a nervous breakdown, it's never sure when her father who is in the merchant navy is returning home, her uncle occupies an ambiguous position in her family. At one point, Mathilda observes that she *was safe, but she knew that under the sleek surface lay mysterious things*. The tense dramatic narrative in this superb book is formed by a fracturing family secret that encases them but is only glimpsed at angles that are limited or perspectives that are askew, until the end.

The sense of the enigmatic in Ursula's books is compelling. In **The Golden Day** (Allen & Unwin, 2011), a glorious book that shimmers with the unknown, eleven schoolgirls are taken by their teacher, Miss Renshaw, on an expedition into the gardens to contemplate death and write poetry. It opens on the day that Ronald Ryan is hanged. The girls emerge alone, without their teacher; she has disappeared in the cave with its gaping mouth, its silence and its terror. This novel is a marvel of experimentation with form. Ursula explains in the *Author's Note* that it was largely inspired by Charles Blackman's paintings of schoolgirls — *lush ... enchanting, disturbing and endlessly evocative*. The chapter titles are all taken from Blackman's work and **Floating Schoolgirl** makes its way overtly into the narrative on the girls' return to their classroom. Cubby, the main character, finds herself floating above, *swimming through the air, like a dream. She floated out the classroom window, her hat half-flying off her head, high above the lane ways and streets. She floated all day while they waited for Miss Renshaw to return*.

Part of the mystery of these novels can be attributed to what is unsaid, what people choose to squirrel away as secrets and which becomes intrinsic to these characters' inner lives and trajectories. When

asked about this, Ursula explains, *I think it's true of literature that sometimes we can be most deeply affected by those unsaid things, the things hidden between the lines of a page. We know they're there, but perhaps nobody can say them, not even the author. But that silence paradoxically gives them great power.*

The motif of reverie and dream which Cubby experiences features strongly in **The Blue Cat**, particularly when Columba, Ellery and Hilda enter Sydney's Luna Park in search of the eponymous cat. The novel is characterised by its dreamlike, disorienting qualities, as are **The Golden Day** and **Abyssinia**. When asked whether **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland** was an important book for her, Ursula responds:

*I was certainly exposed to Alice... like all English-speaking children, but I didn't become enraptured until I was given Martin Gardner's **The Annotated Alice** by my mother when I was 14 — I was very excited by that book and then sought out everything I could read of Lewis Carroll. Disorientation and dreaming — and word play, which is a form of disorientation — are certainly hallmarks of his work.*

(It is interesting to note that artist Charles Blackman was most widely known for his Alice series.)

This third literary characteristic that Ursula attributes to Carroll, word play, is integral to her work. The interest in etymology runs deep; in 2008 the writer published the wildly popular nonfiction book, **The Word Spy** (Penguin Books) which was followed by **The Return of the Word Spy** (2010). When asked about the genesis of these books, Ursula writes:

*Practically speaking, it began as a magazine column when I was working at the NSW Department of Education's School Magazine ... I was encouraged by the then editor, Tohby Riddle, to perhaps expand it into a book, which I eventually did, illustrated by Tohby. But in another sense the genesis was simply my eternal fascination with words which began I suppose as soon as I could speak, but certainly when I started to read and write ... And a conviction that this love of words is natural and common to all children. You don't have to fight hard to get children interested in the things inside **The Word Spy** — they live every moment with this playful curiosity about language.*

In her delightful series of chapter books, **The Cryptic Casebook of Coco Carlomagno (and Alberta)**, (Allen & Unwin) number puzzles, anagrams and mondegreens make their appearance. The books are set in

Argentina — the birthplace of her husband — and are an ode to that country, have two guinea pigs as their mystery-solving heroes and are filled with humour and comic absurdity. The reader is informed in **The Missing Mongoose** (2013), *It took rather a long time to cross the road to the bus stop, as there were many lanes of traffic and not every driver was expert at spotting two small pedestrian guinea pigs.* Here is Ursula on **The Cryptic Casebook** series:

I was really able to let my sense of the ridiculous go full throttle in those books! I loved my little guinea pigs, and having to invent all those crazy puzzles for them. Those books were a total joy to write and probably the only time I have felt that the stories more or less 'flowed' ... out.

Ursula's recent book **Brindabella** (Allen & Unwin, 2018) is an incandescent work. Deceptively simple at first, it tells the story of Pender, a solitary boy who lives in the bush with his ailing artist father. Pender saves a joey after its mother is shot by hunters. Splendidly illustrated throughout, it addresses the nature of love, freedom and sacrifice. In it, we encounter a kind of numinous realm. Ursula perceives this realm as aptly described in *a beautiful tango from the 1920s which talks about half-light — Y todo a media luz crepúsculo interior — Everything there is at half-light, an interior twilight.* Here is Pender after his experience in the bush at night: *Afterwards, when he tried to remember, he could not be sure how long the feeling had lasted. Perhaps it was only a moment, perhaps not even a minute, but in his heart, he felt as though years had passed, even thousands of years. It was a feeling that there were no more years, that there was no more stopping and starting, no more beginnings and endings, no more arrivals or departures.*

The story was based on a 1920 story by Rudolf Těsnohlídek which inspired Leoš Janáček's opera of the same name, **The Cunning Little Vixen**. Ursula and Joyner initially thought to create a graphic novel but then we moved on more to the idea of an illustrated novel. *So while the story at one level is simple and very familiar — a little boy who adopts an orphaned animal — I found it full of deep crevices about art, life, death, nature, attachment, sacrifice. It was for me a very meaningful book to write, perhaps almost the most meaningful.*

In an essay published in **The Age** titled **Hello, darkness my old friend** (2008) (read it if you can) Ursula meditates on this interstitial space that so much of her writing explores. She writes of the moment

of expectant thrill when the lights go down at the beginning of a play or film as this transitional moment between reality and make-believe, the murmur, the shadows and the unknown, that excited me more than the show itself. She goes on to describe this darkness as the passage through, the in-between space that led from the material to the imaginative world. This is a clear evocation of the affect of much of her own writing.

Leaf Stone Beetle (Dirt Lane Press), illustrated by Gaye Chapman, was published this August. Ursula discloses *it's a kind of fable about nature — or perhaps something else.* It has the feel of a Zen story; a resigned sigh in the face of the constancy of change. **Midnight at the Library** (National Library of Australia), commissioned to celebrate the library's 50 year anniversary, and illustrated by Ron Brooks will follow in November. Ursula feels that Brooks's work *in this book is quite magnificent.* She is currently working on a short novel about a puppet show.

I fell in love with Ursula's work after reading **The Blue Cat** last year. Having enjoyed and laughed my way through several of her picture books, I'd missed out on her novels until then. The experience of reading this novel was a revelation, albeit one that was difficult to define or quantify, and one that repeated itself again and again when reading these other novels. The meaning of her work is profound and multi layered. I felt the impulse to write to her: *This beautiful, startling book of yours evokes a time when war comes to town and reality resembles a Hall of Mirrors — distorted, made strange, when impossibilities become possibilities. This book about kindness and foreignness and truths at which we can only grasp, with its delicate poetic prose lodges under the skin, as if it is a febrile dream.*

She answered to say she was very moved. *It's a rare thing, to feel understood — especially when you (I mean me) don't understand yourself! I found it a particularly difficult book to write — what you say about the Hall of Mirrors is perhaps essential to the difficulty — I found I was in a Hall of Mirrors myself ...* This is one of Ursula's most profound literary accomplishments; it takes skill and courage to address the mysterious nature of the world without an attempt to superimpose easy resolutions or explanations over it. Her portraits of *shadows and shining things* revel in this uncertainty; transfigurative experiences to treasure.