*‘Matilda, even you don’t know all the things you know,’ said Elizabeth with a sigh.*

‘Children are new, though we are not,’ wrote American publisher, Ursula Nordstrum. Children see the world with merciless clarity: like the boy in ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ children see what adults willfully deny, and often they dare to speak aloud the vivid truth in front of them. Paradoxically, of course, young people – new as they are – occasionally misinterpret what they see; misunderstanding can prove wonderfully entertaining – even unexpectedly instructive - but, just as often, it may be unseating, disturbing, perhaps terrifying. Finally, watching the adult world so carefully as they do *and* being so much at its mercy, children often become the unwilling keepers of secrets.

It is within this trio of possibilities – an unclouded grasp of truth, an unsteady dance with misinterpretation, and the deadening responsibility of secrets – that some of the best literature of childhood resides. And one of the best of the best, I think, is *The Red Shoe* by Ursula Dubosarsky (Allen & Unwin, Melbourne, 2006).

*‘In a house far away, right at the end of a long, dusty road deep in the bush at the back of Palm Beach, lived three sisters with their mother, their father, and sometimes their Uncle Paul. The three sisters were called Elizabeth, Frances and Matilda…*’

The opening lines of the first chapter suggest the deceptively simple and alluring cadence of fairy tale, and with Elizabeth, Frances and Matilda we are alerted to the magic number of three. Within a couple of pages we are introduced to our King and Queen, our witch and our good fairy, though we are, apparently, reading a realist family story set in Sydney, Australia in 1954.

This first chapter is a masterpiece of concision and allusion; the family’s very ordinary world is evoked in lucid, sensory prose, but subtle, almost fleeting clues suggest a lurking unease. And the interruption of Sunday dinner by a goanna seals the sense of a curse, and coming disaster. *‘A large, grey-green goanna was slowly climbing up the concrete step, out from the tangled bush, through the afternoon heat, towards their house, towards their father’s feet. Its mouth was hanging open, and it raised one of its knobbled legs in the air, spreading its toes apart…The goanna did not move. Its front leg was suspended in the air. It was still as stone, its mouth gaping and its eyes fixed…’*

In fact the novel begins twice; preceding the first chapter is an italicized prologue (headed ‘Once upon a time…’) in which Frances reads to Matilda from a book of fairytales received at Christmas. The book falls open first at ‘The Red Shoes’ by Hans Anderson. This prologue – the eerie Anderson story, and the sisterly unity, and the very funny interruptions and interior musings from Matilda - acts as a lengthy epigraph, hovering over the story proper, echoing through the quietly thrilling family and community mysteries that unfold. ‘“Poor little Karen,”’ says Matilda, as she listens. And then ‘“Lucky little Karen.”’ And by the end, ‘“I don’t like this story,’ said Matilda definitely. ‘I don’t want to learn to read if stories are like that.”’

Duborsarsky is a most literary writer and mines with immense skill the elements and ambience of ‘old story’ in several of her novels. Her great art, I think, is the fusing of those elements with the singularities of real place and time, and character fully drawn with what seems the merest of brush strokes. It is post-War, Cold War Australia, a conservative, slightly paranoid, perhaps even philistine culture. The death penalty is still in place. Polio stalks the community. The threat of nuclear annihilation dominates the headlines. The fauna and flora is both exotic and faintly malevolent. On the other hand, the routines and pleasures of domestic and school life reassure with their ordinariness: roast dinners, overflowing laundries, pet shows, the cinema, Easter eggs. But what is really going on behind this reliable pattern? Why is Elizabeth having a nervous breakdown? Who are the men in black coats next door? Why is Matilda’s imaginary friend, Floreal, so contemptuous of the family? And what about the man with the gun?

Perhaps the true genius of the story is its unfolding from Matilda’s perspective, *‘Some six year-olds are not sneaky, but Matilda was.*’ I relish this line every time I re-read the book, for the seeming paradox within the plain statement, for the marvelous economy with which the nuances of Matilda’s character – and childhood itself – is suggested. Matilda is spiky and a little wilful, a mix of precocious understanding and primitive appetites and anxieties. *‘Her hair was black and so were her eyes. Even her blood was nearly black and seeped out very, very slowly when she cut herself. She was like a spy.’* The author exploits beautifully Matilda’s eye for the truth of the matter and her occasional wonky interpretations. Thus a slightly tilted, almost surreal portrait of the family world and the wider community emerges, leaving the reader anxious, amused, queasy, and somehow always on the edge of their seat.

Ursula Dubosarsky’s work has, at its heart, that quality belonging to only the greatest writers for children, the quality Edward Blishen styled, ‘the young eye’ – a facility that, crucially, isn’t limited to an exclusively child-centred world. It is this that makes Dubosarsky a writer for all ages. It is this that allows her to conjure a world, or a state of being, we all recognise, whatever our age or stage of life. It is this that enables her to weave story out of the concrete questions *and* metaphysical puzzles of nascent understanding, out of the thrilling, semi-darkness of childhood. You could say – to borrow a lovely description of Dubosarsky’s own from a piece she wrote about Tesnohlidek’s (and Janacek’s) *The Cunning Little Vixen* – that her writerly young eye gives us entry to a mesmerising world of ‘eerie indistinctness…a weird half-light, secretive sad, yet full of possibilities.’

Kate De Goldi