

MATILDA TOLD SUCH DREADFUL LIES

LUCY SUSSEX

Lucy Sussex was born in New Zealand in 1957, and works as a researcher and also as a freelance author and editor. She has published widely, writing anything from reviews and literary criticism to horror and detective stories. In 1994 she was a judge for the international Tiptree Award, which honours speculative fiction exploring notions of gender. She has edited four anthologies, which include *The Lottery*, *The Patternmaker* and *She's Fantastical*, which was shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award. She also has produced scholarly bibliographies and editions, chiefly of nineteenth-century literature. Some of her short fiction has been collected in *My Lady Tongue & Other Tales*. She has written two young adult novels, *Deersnake* and *Black Ice*. Her first adult novel, *The Scarlet Rider*, won the Ditmar Award and was shortlisted for the Kelly Award.

The story that follows is very old, and very new ... and uniquely Australian.

* * * *

What's that you've got in your lap? I know you're doing more than contemplating the billabong, sitting there with your back against the big river gum and your straw hat bent over what, since you're one of the womenfolk, I'd say was a mirror — except no mirror goes tap tap tap tap. Seen a lot of new things I have, mostly recently, yet what you're playing with has me mystified. But not for long, I reckon.

I can see it's got keys on it like a button accordion — now that brings back the memories. *Da-dum-de-da-dum ...*

You stopped just then, didn't you, thinking your ears were playing tricks. I'm good at mimicry, that's how I learned to talk, from the various visitors. I can do all sorts of voices, from parrot to chainsaw to what I'm speaking now, Old Bush Bloke. Once heard, and I store it away, like the snatch of button accordion you just heard, playing *the song*. That's from the night a mob as called themselves the Communist Folkclub of Brisbane held a bushdance here. Commemorating the centenary of the song, you see, by

having a knees-up where it all started, beside the bloody billabong.

I could have told them a few things about the song, like how the poet chappie sat, not there, where you are, but two trees along. Wore white like you do, and a big hat, but without flowers on it, being a fella. He had a little notebook and a pencil and he just sat there swatting away the blowies and scribbling. Whistled while he worked, too. Took me some time to figure out what he was up to, till I did my old trick and wormed my way into the back of his head, letting the thoughts run over and around me until they made sense.

Trying to fit words to the tune, he was. He had a story in mind, but he couldn't get the words to suit. So I thought I'd give him a helping hand. Course, some things got lost in the translation, but he got his song down in the end. Did all right with it, too, seeing as it ended up as the unofficial national anthem. Now and then I think I shoulda had a share in the royalties, but then I've not exactly got a use for money.

Still, that damn song's brought me extra visitors, like the commie folkies and their centenary. And now you, with your hat and your ... excuse me, the curiosity's just killing me, to hear that tap tap tap and not know what you're up to. Ah, that's better. Hmm. Thought so. In the storytelling game, are you? Just like the poet chappie.

I like a good yarn, though it's not something I encounter often. For a while the number of stories I heard could be counted on a double bunch of dactyls. No, I don't mean fingers — I'm not one of your speciesists, could hardly be, given the circumstances. These days when I think back the line between paw and claw, digit and hand, seems a bit blurred. Ask me about the missing link, and I'd say something like: well, it's not that easy to pinpoint. But I do remember the first yarnspinner, like it was only yesterday.

Being of the stationary kind of persuasion, I usually have to wait until the tale, or rather its teller, comes to me. So that meant I didn't know about stories for ... oh ... must have been millennia, and I mean thousands of years, mate. Not that I was bored, given the visitors. Sometimes it seemed that you could blink and they'd be gone forever: goodbye diprotodon, procoptodon, thylacine. Ever followed a roo's tracks, or seen from the mud around a waterhole who's come a-drinking? I had quite a visitor's book, though it was only temporary. Cast of thousands, no plot, unless it was who ate who. Yep, that was something you could certainly read from the footprints, until the next rain came and washed it all away.

First time I saw one of the storytelling mob, he chased an old man

emu through the billabong, catching it in the claggy dry season mud at the shallow end. Well, that wasn't unusual, nor was the rock he used to dispatch the emu, though I have to say it made a rotten axe. He dragged the carcass onto dry land quickly, showing a proper regard — not like some have — for the local water supply. Up on the bank he lit a fire and singed off the feathers. The meat was just starting to cook when the rest of his band — missus, littlies, coupla greyhairs, caught up with him.

Their eyes just bulged at the food, and that's when he started, singing out at the top of his voice, wagging his backside like an emu, miming axe blows. Had me flummoxed at first, till I thought of dingos dozing in the sunlight with their paws twitching and mouths salivating, dreaming about the chase. Yet he was awake, not asleep and telling a story about Emu and Mr Great Big Hero Hunter. Since he hadn't got the audience there for his big kill, except me, and I don't count, he was letting them know what happened. And embellishing it too, I could tell — he made that little barney go on for thrice the time it actually did.

Liar, liar your pants are on fire, I could have said, not that I knew what pants were, because he wasn't wearing *any*. Indeed I wouldn't see any nether garments, as the parson chappies would say, for thousands of years. In that time I got to hear a lot of stories, though. Emu and Hunter went through a few changes over the centuries, all sorts of stuff about totems mixed up in it, also ancestors ... because it became the Hunters' family history. Lost count of the number of descendants he had, but they kept telling the story. They'd visit once or twice a year, have a good party with lots of dancing and bush tucker, and yarn to each other in the firelight.

Other stories they told were Kookaburra and the three sexy sisters, Greedy old Auntie who became a fruitbat, and bit by bit I thought I got the hang of this storytelling business. It had a beginning, middle and end, and also a moral. Don't eat someone else's tucker, don't go fornicating with your grandma, or something terrible will happen. It may sound old-fashioned, but then I am. Old-fashioned and unashamed of it. You notice I used the word *fornicate*, instead of the modern equivalent...

Well, like I said, I thought I'd got the hang of yarnspinning, but then along came another mob of storytellers and moved the bloody goalposts. It happened on a peaceful kind of day: sunny, warm and so still the gumleaves hardly stirred from sunrise to sunset. Just like today, in fact, and if you'll look around you'll see the scene of the crime's hardly changed. I don't care for change much. That was why what happened came as such a surprise.

One moment there I was, minding my own business and next half a doz of the Hunter family came haring across the plain, as if they were closing in on a big roo. When they got nearer, I saw from the look on their faces that something was badly wrong. What's eating you, I thought, though a better phrasing might have been: what's gunna eat you? I wondered if the thylacoleo, our local attempt at a lion, had made a comeback, especially since I could hear something coming, big and noisy.

It went: thud-ker-thump, thud-ker-thump. I could see the Hunters wanted to run, but they were utterly bushwhacked. Through the trees I saw something bigger than the local fauna had been for — oh, for several eons. It was misshapen too, with two heads, one a bit like the Hunters, but the colour of a ghost gum, the other long-faced, with flaring nostrils and great staring eyes. The creature stopped under the paperbark, and blow me down if it didn't split itself down the middle, Ghostgum leaping off Longface, like a little from off ma's back. At the sight all the Hunters threw themselves into the water, there being nowhere else to hide but under the overhanging banks. But they didn't stand a chance, for Ghostgum lifted what looked to me like your standard digging stick and pulled thunder out of the air.

It deafened me, and the Hunters, who were swimming and wading into the billabong as fast as they could, they stopped with each peal of thunder, one by one. Happened so fast there wasn't a damn thing I could do, not even when I saw the red blood seeping into the water. Longface put its head down and ate grass, not interested; and that told me just who was the herbivore, who the carnivore. Ghostgum, on the other hand, he cuddled his stick, spearthrower, whatever, and smiled at the bodies floating in my billabong.

Pleased with himself he was, I could tell that, despite the contents of his mind being largely alien to me. I read snatches of his story, though none of it made sense for a good long while: something about him and a lot of other ghostgums on this big canoe, a few of them chiefs with thunderkilling sticks and bright red ochre all over them, but the most locked below, tied together and feeling pretty sorry for themselves too. He sat there in the darkness running through his memories, mostly one of a dead ghostgum girl, her throat cut. That was why he was travelling over the water, being *transported*, and he was pleased about that too, the alternative being him hanging neck first from a big bare tree.

It was a nasty place, that mind of his, and it all got too much for me — the crowding of the ghostgum faces, more than all the Hunters I'd seen over the millennia, the words I'd never heard before, the sense that things

were changing in my nice quiet billabong, which was now dyed red with blood. I got out quick and just let Ghostgum ride away, on Longface, whom he called Horse. He called himself an Englishman, an Explorer, though when I understood more of his thoughts, I knew he was only an explorer's servant, hired to do the dirty work. Which meant, slaughtering the Hunter people, just because they had a bit of spirit in them and weren't going to be walked over...

Now, I'm the contemplative type, not a big hero. I let bygones be bygones, arrange things my own quiet way, which means no showing off, no getting physical if I can help it. But I had to do something, the fish and tadpoles were already gagging on the blood, and I knew the usual mob of roos, etc. would show up for drinkies at sunset. No way was I going to let the local water supply stay polluted. So I just rolled up the Hunters in a sheet of paperbark and pushed them through the clay bottom of the billabong and deep into the rock shelf below, which was ammonite era. Completely confused the geological record, not that anybody's ever going to make a scientific paper out of it. They'd have to get past me first.

It's a pleasant spot, the billabong, just the place for a village, but you'll notice that nobody's ever done more than camp here, temporarily. Wonder why? See, I don't mind the occasional company, but no way am I gunna be in anyone's backyard. Sure the idea entered the various visitors' minds, but I just reached in and nipped it in the bud. Just like I got rid of the ghostgum's tucker, those bloody great wallopers of cattle, and worse, those stupid woolly sheep, with their hard hooves crumbling the banks and muddying the water. It was dead easy, all I had to do was take the idea of the slaughterhouse from out of the ghostgum's minds, put it into those herbivore brains, and then watch the stampede.

After a while I got used to the new mob of visitors, who weren't all bad. Once I got to understand them, I found they had some interesting stories, quite my sort of thing. They believed in beginnings and ends, and morals too — that's why their evildoers were punished by being chained up and shipped to the other side of the world. Convicts, that was what my first ghostgum had been, and I saw a few like him, though none with such a nasty little history. Others came visiting, squatters, gold prospectors and drovers, though in the case of the latter, they tended to find themselves chasing a trail of dust and dags across the plain.

There was a governess from one local station, whose head was full of tales about love and romance, and the overseer from the next station, who thought a lot about a lass with quite a history, *Fanny Hill* by name. They used to ride out for trysts here, and told each other stories, so to speak.

Then they didn't show for quite a while, and when they did they had half a dozen steps and stairs, come to get christened and watch ma and pa get married. See, a parson chappie had trekked out to this district, which was back of beyond those days, and found himself work for a week.

Up on the far bank, that space I keep clear in case the visitors feel like a spot of dancing, he set up his travelling altar and font. The latter was for the ghostgum littlies, and a bunch of the Hunters, the women in floral smocks, the men in *nether garments* and calico shirts, come to be baptized too. Wasn't their idea, they weren't keen on Christianity except for the bit about "Thou Shalt Not Commit Murder!". But they cheered up mightily when they realized that some things didn't change at this particular waterhole. See, when the parson got carried away with his casting out of the baptismal demons and actually sloshed holy water into the billabong, the Hunters danced for joy, because at the end I was still bloody there. The parson reckoned it was conversion enthusiasm; I just had a good old laugh. Then, while I had a chance, I picked his mind about the big black storybook he carried. It had some interesting yarns in it...

Now, I'd had bit parts in some of the Hunters' stories, which is why they kept visiting. Still do, the last time being only last month, with several lawyer chappies in tow. Figure they must be planning a land claim, which is fine, so long as they don't get the idea they own this place. I suppose that's maybe what brought you here, though you've got the song in your head, I can tell by the rhythm of your tap, tap tap. One catchy little ditty, innit? Whitefellas' dreaming, that's what the Hunters reckon, but they know there's more to the story than what the poet wrote down in his little book. Like the swagman, f'r instance.

Now I've seen swaggies over the years, and never a one's been what you might call jolly. Jolly skinny, maybe, and jolly down at heel, but never cheerful. Life's hard for roving farmworkers, which is the polite way of putting it, the impolite way being tramp. That summer was tough for everything in the district: heatwave, dry, and all sorts of trouble among the ghostgums, that I never quite worked out, except that it had to do with sheep. Jumbuck, that's the word the poet used, though nobody says that now. Funny how the name came about, from the Hunters mishearing "*Jump Up!*" and thinking it was the proper noun. Knowing the way drovers swear, it's lucky we didn't have flocks of *fornicators* all over the place.

Anyway, early one evening I got a visitor, creeping through the trees, a big heavy swag near bending him double. When he dropped the load I saw he was a skinny old fella, bald as an egg on top, with a long stringy

grey beard. He had a way of looking around, as if someone were after him, and I knew why. That bag of his smelt of someone else's tucker.

He got his breath back, and then he unrolled the swag, to reveal a mass of dusty curls. Dead sheep, but not any old hunk of mutton, because the kink and thickness of that wool said pedigree merino. Madman, I thought, or too starved to care, or both. He got out a big knife, and started carving up the carcass like a butcher. The blowies of course made a beeline, but he just stopped, dug a deep hole and buried the innards, being tidy, or covering his tracks. The hide he hung over a bough, for drying later. Then he started a small fire, banking it up so it got hot enough for a roast. He was so peckish by this stage that he was fair drooling.

Some galahs up in the treetops were having a squawking match, so he didn't hear, like I did, the sounds of a party of three or four on horseback, coming up quietly. He was just sitting there, staring into his fire, and I caught the topmost thoughts in his mind. They were mostly about roast lamb, but there was other stuff, recent too, about a couple of young lovers lying dead and bloody in a paddock. Been to a bushdance, they had, going home happy as lizards until they met this jolly swaggie. He grinned at the memory, and I started to get an odd feeling about him. The word's at the back of your mind, if you don't mind I'll borrow it. Yep, *déjà vu*.

I got distracted from what he was thinking then, because the next lot of visitors were nearing, as close to tiptoe as a horse can get. There was tracking going on, the sort of thing the Hunters do better than anyone else, but it wasn't a roo hunt, more a manhunt. That must have been one prize jumbuck, I thought, and sat back to witness the music, not that any of us knew the song then. The horses stopped for a while and there was a bit of whispering. Then they CHAAARGED!

It wasn't true that the squatter rode up on his thoroughbred — I reckon that was just the poet putting himself in the story. He did get it right about the three police, for what came galloping through the trees were two young constables, both new chums, and a black tracker, one of the Hunter family. The old swaggie jumped like he'd been shot, which he hadn't, it being damn hard to hit anything from a speeding horse. He let out a screech, as though he'd just seen one of the parson's demons. See, the jumbuck was weighing on his conscience, as were the lovers lying dead in the paddock, and a lot of other bad stuff too.

The swaggie had no place to run, as the coppers were coming hard and fast, so he threw himself into the billabong. As he hit water I caught a thought of his, that maybe this wasn't a good idea, because he was starting

to remember the place. I got the picture then, clear in his mind, of young Ghostgum when he was clean-shaven and had a full head of hair, aiming with his shotgun at the black bodies splashing away from him. Fifty years ago, it had been, and now there came more evil memories, the lass back in England with her cut throat, and a whole bunch of others, all of them unable to fight for their lives.

As I said before, I think a story should have a beginning, middle and end. I like a moral too, and this filthy coward never had a proper one made of him, because transportation only gave him more places to get away with murder. Also, it had been a long time since I'd been in a story. So, when he surfaced he found me, getting physical just for him, which meant large as life and twice as ugly. He got such a shock he went and p-ed himself, and because he'd polluted my billabong *again*, I spat the dummy. I just grabbed him in my jaws and drowned him in the mud at the bottom of the waterhole. Then I threw the body twenty or so feet up in the air, and it came crashing down in front of the coppers.

I can do the police in different voices: the Irish bloke said "*Uisge-each*", the Scots bloke said "*Kelpie*"; all translations for what the black tracker thought, but didn't say, because you don't talk about some things with the uninitiated. As they'd good and got the point, I disappeared into the water, making it look as if it was boiling, just for effect. Oh, I know I was showing off, but it only happens once in a blue moon, orright? They exchanged glances, and then, because they had evidence of sheep-stealing and the culprit had been banged to rights, against the ground in fact, they made the most of the opportunity. Gathering up the remains of jumbuck and swagman, they loaded them onto the spare horse, and skedaddled.

Course, back at the station questions might have been asked, about the guilty party's broken bones, from the fall, and his drowning in a waterhole the locals knew was only a foot deep during the dry season. But he was just helping with police enquiries, you see. I reckon that if I hadn't interfered, they'd have had the pleasure of beating confessions out of him to decades of unsolved homicides. Ah, but then all those books saying whodunnit, fictions the lot of them, would never have been written. Nor the song, because the poet didn't want to write about a murderer, he wanted a working class hero, even if it was a swaggie. He was slightly commie at the time, but soon got over it.

I knew the black tracker wouldn't talk, so it must have been one of the others, over a few beers in a shanty, maybe. Coupla years later the poet heard a wisp or shred of the story, and showed up one day on his

thoroughbred, seeking inspi-bloody-ration. He thought he'd write a nice little song about a haunted billabong. Course it wasn't haunted, except by yours truly, but I just couldn't seem to get that through his head.

You've gone all quiet now, no more tap tap tap. Well, just then I went quiet myself, as you do when the silence of this place gets to you, and you just want to listen. Oh, tap tapping again, are we? I've got the feel of your thoughts now, I know that what you've got there is a new-fangled notebook, a machine for storytelling. Mind if I sneak a look over your shoulder, see through your eyes a mo? I do like a good yarn.

Well, blow me down, if all those lines and squiggles there aren't your story, but *mine*. And all the time there I was thinking I was talking to myself as usual, with nobody listening. Psychic, are you? Part Hunter? Gotta say one thing, you're good at taking dictation, much better than the poet. That's word perfect, faithful. Good as your other little stories, that you write in this notebook? It's only my second attempt...

What you're gunna do with it, though, now you've got the real story behind the ballad? A yarn's made for spinning to others, you know. Think you got a sure little earner there, good as "Waltzing Matilda", by Mr A.B. Paterson and A.N. Other? Like I said before, it's not as if I've got any use for money, bunyips don't, on the whole. So take it and good luck to you.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

The lyrics to most nationalistic songs usually don't bear close examination; and "Waltzing Matilda" has a plot as well. My old literary gossip Daisy Rose (pseud.) and I started picking holes in it one day, making comments like "Whoever heard of anyone drowning in a billabong?", or "Why send three coppers to arrest a sheep-thief?" and "Why didn't they just drag him out and arrest him?". Conclusion: the bunyip did it. Hence this story.

— *Lucy Sussex*