

Review of *Flyaway*

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Kathleen Jennings. *Flyaway*. Tor.com, 2020. Hardcover. 175 pg. \$19.99. ISBN 978-1-250-26004-9.

Author and illustrator Kathleen Jennings has accomplished something wonderful – at least to my American eyes – with her graceful, evocative novella *Flyaway*. In bringing a fairytale sensibility and ethos to her native Australia (the story is set in the Outback of western Queensland, or, as Jennings poetically opens, “somewhere between the Coral Sea and the Indian Ocean but on the way to nowhere, there was a district called – oh, let’s call it Inglewell.”), she demonstrates the generality of that sensibility (11). The lessons of fairytales, their tropes, their internal constructions, their stories of mysterious and profound transformation – these are the common property of humanity and know no geographical boundaries. We’ve seen, of course, fairytales before that take place both from and in settings far and away from the traditional woods of Mitteleuropa, but *Flyaway* beautifully reinforces the universality of the fairytale. Leaving aside the beauty of the writing, the novella would be a powerful resource for scholars looking to explore not only Australian fantasy but the commonalities of the fairytale genre as a whole.



At once Jennings establishes a powerful, immediate sense of fantastical place and mood, with her indeterminate and airy description. Her opening chapter “All That Was” describes Inglewell, and its central town of Runagate, in terms of their distance, their ephemerality in the face of harsh reality, and their underlying endurance that betrays the existence of a more lasting order of things.

It was a fragile beauty: too east to bleach with dust and history, to dehydrate with heat, rend with the retort of a shotgun or the strike of a bullbar, blind with sun on metal. Easy to turn from it, disgusted and afraid. But if you got out of a car to stretch your legs and instead were still, if you crouched down and waited, it would find you, nosing among the grass like the breeze. The light and loveliness would get into your bones, into your veins. It would beat in your blood like drumming in the ground.

Memory seeped and frayed there, where ghosts stood silent by fenceposts. (12-13)

And the story is deeply rooted in the slipperiness of memory. The novella’s protagonist is young Bettina Scott, troubled by her inability to recollect key elements of her past, including the

whereabouts of her missing father and brothers. Her fellow Runagate denizens (who are rife with suspicions and hatreds about one another's families) seem to know more about Tina's life and past than she does. There is a Gothic horror-style unease in Tina's memory gaps, especially when combined with her mother's unnerving need for reassurances about every aspect of their lives. Something is clearly askew, not right, not the way things are supposed to be. And so, Tina embarks on a quest of sorts, complete with companions, visits to mysterious places, and interwoven stories. As she notes, "*It could be my dad*, I thought, rustily – I'd so carefully not thought that. *If all those stories mean anything, they mean sometimes people do just disappear. And maybe they can be found*" (121).

Along with the unreliability of memory comes the exploration of loss. Things and people go missing all the time in *Flyaway*, despite attempts to bind them. A repeating theme is Tina's friend/enemy Gary Damson, who is also seeking to solve the mysteries of various disappearances and whose family builds fences in the district. The Damsons are concerned with maintaining order and balance in the face of wildness: his family is one of the ones who "know what's going on... It's what my gran says. We're charged with keeping things on an even keel" (161). In the most dramatic instance, an entire school in the town of Woodwild vanishes forever beneath creeping lantern-bush, taking with it most of the town's children in an Australian Outback turn on the Pied Piper tale. Order and civilization (and memories) fall beneath the power of mystery and disorder and loss.

The world forgot we'd ever had a school. In Woodwild, it felt as if the vines had grown inside our skulls. We'd never get past them. No kiss could fix *that*... The police *investigated*. They went into steep country and gullies. They found dying stands of lantern-bush, sheep bones, cattle bones, rusting carcasses of cars. They went right into the caves. I heard a rumor they found a cavern nearly beneath the school, the stone white in light filtering down through knotted roots. Nothing else (113).

In the end, however, the encroaching power of loss is belied by liberation. As in the old stories, the quest is completed, the riddle solved, the lost found. (Not to give away the ending but suffice it to say that the novella's title becomes quite literal by the book's conclusion.) This is all too appropriate, given *Flyaway's* deep immersion in the power and impact that stories can have. Stories can be embodied and given life - literally here, this being a fairytale. "The schoolchildren of Woodwild, David Spicer, Linda Aberdeen, all who went before and alongside and after them: they are trapped by the stories that made them and dragged them in; they are caught and held by town and road and lantern-bush and trees." (158) Jennings artfully weaves the power of story into the whole of the novella: people tell stories, people become stories, people's absences form their own stories in turn, and so on. Stories reflect the mysteries and randomness we encounter in our lives, and in Jennings' tale, they often cause them as well. The true heart of *Flyaway* comes about halfway through the book, when that view is explicitly noted. It gives additional weight to *Flyaway's* value as a profound work of modern folklore that carries on the hallowed fairytale tradition of exploring the human experience through the fantastical lens of story.

“There aren’t any stories except the ones we bring with us,” Trish Aberdeen used to say, stamping into the long grass after school, as if she wanted it to be true (as if she didn’t keep thinking she’d seen wolves and tigers stalking her in the scrub). Gary Damson, who knew better, who suspected Trish knew better too, would hold his tongue.

Because even if she were right, *something* had to happen to all the stories no one wanted. Histories and memories that had been taken into the trees, beyond the fences and roads – those seams of the world from which reason and civilization leak – and abandoned.

They must have outnumbered all the living populations of Inglewell. Stories that had belonged to the people who lived there before the Spicers established Runagate Station.... Battles, massacres, murder; bushrangers and lonely revenge; tales of whose last stand was on this knob of land, of what will catch the toes of children swimming unattended, of witches in the scrub waiting for the unwary, of loping beats and whispering megarrities. Then there were the stories of those who had simply...gone. (48-49)

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