

Ruth Dark

A CELEBRATION



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Ruth Park

A Celebration



Compiled and edited by

Joy Hooton

Friends of the National Library of Australia
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Acknowledgements



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Ruth Park, aged 26



Joy Hooton

surveys Ruth Park's life and work



Ruth Park was born in Auckland, New Zealand, the daughter of a pioneering bridge builder and road maker, whose work took his family into the wild territory of North Auckland and the King Country. As a result she had a singular early childhood, growing up as 'a forest creature', familiar with the New Zealand bush rather than with the products of civilisation or with children of her own age. Books were largely absent, the family possessing two which she was not allowed to read. The school that she subsequently attended in the small town of Te Kuiti boasted a library of eight books held behind a glass door. Nevertheless, she was a fluent reader of newspapers, public signs and other miscellaneous forms of print. In *A Fence around the Cuckoo* (1992) she emphasises the most important aspects of this early experience for her development as a writer: 'a solitary childhood; an introspective, often numinous landscape; people very close to their ancestral roots and showing it on their faces and in their idiom and manner of thought' (pp. 39–40).

Park made up for the lack of books by observing and eavesdropping, developing the visual and aural skills which would later become striking qualities in all her writing. Meanwhile, the human world of rural New Zealand in the later years of the Great Depression sharpened her awareness of hardship as a reality in the lives of those around her family. If extreme poverty was a powerful challenge to human resilience, tolerance, charity and resource, it also produced diverse responses ranging from the inspiring to the degrading.

Familiarity with the two powerful, diverse cultures of Te Kuiti—Maori and European settler—was also highly significant for Park's subsequent work, making for that ability to write from within,

and without, a culture. The Irish experience of deprivation, poetry and exile is deeply implicated in her writing, as it is in D'Arcy Niland's, but it is presented with the same mix of imaginative empathy and detachment as her realisation of other cultural groupings, whether ethnic or familial. *A Fence around the Cuckoo* is also revealing of her childhood insecurities, for example her mother's near fatal illness and her father's bankruptcy. Similarly, Park's writing demonstrates an extraordinary sensitivity to children's feelings and unexpressed fears.

These early insecurities, compounded by New Zealand's severe losses in both World Wars, appear to have heightened her awareness of life's risks and, paradoxically, her willingness to be a risk taker. As a teenager leaving Second World War New Zealand in pursuit of an uncertain journalistic career in San Francisco, she took as her banner the Maori phrase:

He toa piki pari ma te pari. He who climbs a cliff may die on the cliff, so what? Always a risk-taker by nature, now I became one by intent.

(*A Fence around the Cuckoo*, p. 293)



Ruth Park began writing early, regularly contributing poems and stories to the *New Zealand Herald's* children's page, and subsequently to the *Auckland Star* and overseas newspapers such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *San Francisco Examiner*. Her formal education was conventional; in secondary college it was gained in part by means of a National Scholarship which a dedicated nun and 'the best teacher [she] ever had' pushed her into winning. Far more important was the self education she rapidly received from witnessing the struggles, disappointments, frustrations, failings, achievements and aspirations of members of her family and community.

A bleak period living with relatives in Auckland after her father's bankruptcy and an even bleaker one in isolated Tanekaha came to an end when she was offered a copyholder's job in the proofreading department of the *Auckland Star*. After two years she was put in charge of the children's page, succeeding Sheila Quinn as 'Wendy' and receiving the pay of a male second-year cadet. Meanwhile a relationship by correspondence with another aspiring writer from Australia, D'Arcy Niland, began after an inauspicious start. The two met for the first time in 1940 when Park paid a brief visit to Sydney. They were immediately attracted to each other, but for Park at least a career in journalism had priority over marriage at that stage. By 1941 the children's page of the *Star* had shrunk dramatically in size prior to its total disappearance. Fearful of finding herself in a permanent rut, she decided to take advantage of an offer of a position as 'gofer' from the *San Francisco Examiner*, a decision which Niland strongly opposed. Then, three days before her projected departure, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour, and all travel was cancelled. Fired by an interview with the *Star's* Chief Reporter, which made it plain that women journalists were not welcome, she determined to try journalism in Sydney. There a different future rapidly proposed itself in the form of the successful marital and literary partnership with Niland.

The Nilands' decision to depend entirely on their writing for survival was not an immediate one. Rejected from the armed services on medical grounds, Niland was drafted for work in the woolsheds in outback New South Wales. He subsequently made good use of this varied experience as woolshed rouseabout. Park, who accompanied him, also gained from experiences working variously as a shearers' cook, fruit picker, opal miner, and secretary and housekeeper for a taxi-driver. While still in the outback they received news that the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) had accepted a series of radio plays as well as Park's stories about a mouse for the Children's Session, thus beginning their long association with ABC radio. For the family especially, it was to

prove a steady lifeline, the weekly series 'The Wide-Awake Bunyip' providing the 'absolute rockbottom' of their financial affairs in the 1940s and the long-running 'Muddle-Headed Wombat' series providing for a time some steady income after Niland's early death in 1967.

In their lively joint autobiography, *The Drums Go Bang!* (1956), Park and Niland describe their early years of trying to wrest a living from freelance writing. Park covers the same period more frankly and inwardly in *Fishing in the Styx* (1993). In this later book the pseudonyms adopted for Niland, Park, and Niland's brother, Beresford, who shared much of their early married life, are abandoned in favour of their real names. Specific experiences of loneliness, anxiety and illness, which are glossed over with a bubbly humour in *The Drums Go Bang!*, are acknowledged and retrospectively explored. Both books nevertheless give a graphic picture of the extreme difficulties of surviving as freelance writers in the 1940s, a profession generally perceived by others as an impossibility and even by the young writers themselves from time to time as 'a dream for children':

Time and again we despaired sufficiently to decide against continuing writing. But always when morning came, perhaps with a glittering bright blue day ahead of it, we decided to give freelancing just one more week. It was not only obstinacy that drove us on. Basically, it was our great pleasure in writing, the joyful and unappeasable hunger to "put it down", to create, however imperfectly, some facsimile of life as we saw it.

(The Drums Go Bang!, pp. 156–57)

Aware that they would have to write for 30 to 40 markets to be successful and that 'in the writing game nothing is certain except uncertainty', they wrote long and short stories, articles, radio talks, radio plays, westerns, romances, true confessions, even gag scripts for Dick Bentley, the radio comic. Writing about 60 000 words a week, they could expect to sell about 15 000, selling the rest later, or

re-fashioning it as opportunities arose. Even pulp writing helped to finance more serious endeavours and it also taught key skills: 'simplicity of thought sequence, clarity of character, a strong forward movement in story, and the priceless art of ending where you finish' (*The Drums Go Bang!*, p. 158).

Meanwhile, faced with Sydney's accommodation crisis of the war and postwar years, Park and Niland had settled in the inner city slum of Surry Hills, where the first of their five children was born. In her autobiographies and in her novels of Surry Hills, Park has recorded her fascination with the suburb's culture, even though she hated its ugliness, dirt, congestion and cruelties, as well as the fatalism that often created fecklessness. Though on the one hand separated from its inhabitants by very different attitudes and expectations, on the other hand she felt at one with them. As for Sydney as a whole, the city's striking individualities, ranging from the ornate remnants of its Victorian past to the modernity of the business centre, stimulated the sense of place which is always vividly present in her writing.

An experience of running a delicatessen for three weeks gave her marvellous copy, but it was not until the *Sydney Morning Herald* announced a literary competition with a prize of £2000 for the best novel that Park seriously considered mining the rich materials provided by Surry Hills. The novel, eventually titled *The Harp in the South* (1948), was written in New Zealand on a kitchen table after her two children were asleep, while the Nilands were staying with Park's family.

The Drums Go Bang! concludes with the now familiar story of *The Harp in the South's* winning first prize in the 1946 *Sydney Morning Herald* competition. It was an event which provoked polarised reactions from the Australian public. In that early autobiography the Nilands describe the publication of the novel as a 'bombshell' which 'showered both writers with shrapnel, ignominy and better prospects'. From 1948 the prolific work of both writers was widely published both in Australia and overseas and recognised in numerous awards and dramatisations. The reason, however, for the

immediate hostile reaction to the novel in Australia when it was serialised in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1947 remains a mystery. Overseas publishers Michael Joseph of London and Houghton Mifflin of Boston were enthusiastic about the novel and it received good reviews in such overseas newspapers and journals as the *Times Literary Supplement*, the London *Sunday Graphic*, the London *Evening Standard*, the London *Sunday Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Saturday Review of Literature*, the New York *Herald Tribune*, and the *New York Times*. Howard Spring, author of *How Green Was My Valley*, writing in the London *Sunday Graphic*, praised the novel's realistic presentation of slum life, and the author's appreciation that extreme poverty does not necessarily exclude gaiety, goodness, aspiration and achievement. Shawn O'Leary, summarising the novel's extensive international reception in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (1 May 1948), concluded that Park was now established overseas and described it as the best novel published in Australia for several years.

Subsequently translated into 37 languages, dramatised as a television serial as recently as 1985–86, a Book Society and Book Club choice, shortlisted for several literary prizes including the Vie Femina, set as a standard text on secondary school courses and for the New South Wales Higher School Certificate Examination and never out of print, the novel has firmly inserted itself into the literary culture. Nevertheless, in Australia in 1948, Angus & Robertson published the book grudgingly and the *Bulletin's* 'Red Page', while taking a would-be-sophisticated line in ridiculing those who objected to the novel's realism and treatment of 'the facts of life', cast doubt on its literary quality. At the same time, the 'Letters to the Editor' page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* was filled with vociferous complaints from general 'readers', most of whom appear to have rested their case on a reading of the newspaper's synopsis. Park, in *Fishing in the Styx*, recalls the shock of hearing a Catholic priest denounce the novel in church, although it was praised as an influential moral work by the priest of another church. Others were equally loud in praise of the novel and it became an

effective weapon in the hands of social reformers, contributing to the Government of New South Wales's slum clearance movement in Sydney.

But Park never intended the book to have a crusading function and has since expressed doubts about the benefits of relocating slum-dwellers to the city's outlying suburbs. In *The Drums Go Bang!* she describes the last line of the book—Mumma Darcy's reflection summing up the family's philosophy, 'I was thinking of how lucky we are'—as 'the key that opened the door'. Attracted to the strangeness of life in Surry Hills, 'an antique island where the nineteenth century still prevailed', Park centred her story on a group of people, largely of Irish extraction, whose zest for laughing and loving remained undiminished notwithstanding their low expectations and material and educational poverty: 'she certainly liked them, mostly because in the midst of their dirt and poverty and fecklessness they contrived to be happy' (p. 181).

In 1949 Park published a sequel to *The Harp in the South*, *Poor Man's Orange*, and in 1985 a prequel, *Missus*, which deals with the early experiences of the individuals who were to become the Darcy family. The trilogy was published as *Ruth Park's Harp in the South Novels* by Penguin in 1987, following the successful series for television. The book has also been published in a form accessible to children and, co-scripted with Leslie Rees, produced and published as a play.

The continuing popularity of *The Harp* is easy to understand. If one listed the negative aspects of the presentation of life in Surry Hills, the novel might seem grim in the extreme, for there is no glossing of cruelties, ignorance, dirt, disease, bigotry, and severe physical and emotional suffering. The frank treatment of such topics as child abuse, abortion and prostitution shocked some contemporary readers, although it would scarcely raise a hair in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the novel's overwhelming and continuing impressions, which generations of readers have registered, are warmth and even vigour.

Much of this is due to Park's rich sense of place and her ability to express the distinctiveness of her 'antique island' in prose of extraordinary vitality and colour. Few writers can equal her lucid ability to create not just the visual impressions of a scene, but its smells and sounds and the powerful emotions they evoke. As for the human environment, she has a Dickensian zest for the odd and the comedic, although these qualities are valued less for their picturesque effects than for their ingredients of tenacity, spirit and courage. The most valued of her rich gallery of characters, both in *The Harp* and in her subsequent fiction, are those who, however flawed, have an integrity of being, an impregnable individuality, which lifts them above the crowd and equips them to surmount, at least in spirit, the griefs, frustrations and misadventures which invariably strew their progress.



Another reason for the novel's enduring popularity must be its reflection of characteristic traits in Australian culture. Writing to some extent as an outsider, but with a wealth of experience of the Australasian Irish-Catholic heritage, she was able to capture both the culture's familiarity and its strangeness within the context of the raw environment of the inner city. In this connection it is interesting that Niland, the born and bred Australian, should initially reject the idea of Surry Hills as a fruitful setting for a novel as overly familiar. When Park first met the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* after *The Harp* was shortlisted for the prize, he was amazed that the author was a woman and, what was more, a young one. It was an understandable reaction given the novel's maturity of experience, craft and philosophy. Now, thanks to *A Fence around the Cuckoo* and *Fishing in the Styx*, we have a clearer understanding of the many-layered youthful experience which effectively countered natural chronology.

Park's career since the explosion of *The Harp* onto the literary scene in 1947, possibly the most prolific in Australian literature, has been made up of multiple strands. She has written books for children of all ages; novels for adults; well-researched documentaries of place; scripts for film,

television and, in greatest number, radio; articles for journals and newspapers, especially for the women's page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*; three autobiographies; plays and short stories; a biography of Les Darcy and an informative guide to Australia for German readers. Much of her work has been translated into other languages, some novels have been produced for stage, television and film and she has won numerous awards. Niland's work was also well received, especially his novel *The Shiralee* (1955) which became a bestseller and a popular film. The vast extent of Park's unpublished work (probably 30 to 40 adult plays and 5000 children's scripts) and the ephemeral nature of some of it, as well as her frequent collaborations with Niland before his death in 1967, means that no bibliography can hope to do justice to her output.

In some of Park's novels for adults, such as the sombre *The Witch's Thorn* (1951), the light-hearted *Pink Flannel* (1955) and the period novel, *One-A-Pecker, Two-A-Pecker* (1957), she returned to her New Zealand experience. The last, later titled *The Frost and the Fire* (1964), demonstrated her bent for historical research as well as the affinity for the nineteenth century which was to emerge in several of her subsequent novels for adults and children. In *A Power of Roses* (1953) she returns to the slums of Sydney. *Serpent's Delight* (1953) explores with psychological acumen the tensions which often lie submerged in families but which may fuel destructive patterns of behaviour. *Swords and Crowns and Rings* (1977), winner of the Miles Franklin Award of that year and highly commended by the National Book Council, is in some ways a departure in Park's adult fiction although it draws once again on her remarkable historical knowledge and sense of period and place. Combining myth and realism in an original way and set mainly in rural Australia 1907–32, it is the story of a dwarf's quest for self-acceptance, love and dignity. Jackie Hanna's encounters with a range of largely mean-spirited individuals as his quest takes him from his home town of Kingsland to outback New South Wales and finally to Sydney,

and his dogged grip on life, are reminiscent of Steinbeck. The story of his relationship with his sweetheart, Cushie Moy, however, introduces softer, more romantic and fantastic elements, heightening the story's mythic power.

 Fantasy has also been a strong element in Park's writing for children, mingled with whimsical humour and often with social realism and history. The 'Muddle-Headed Wombat' series, which ran on the ABC's children's session from 1957 to 1971 and was intended for an audience of young listeners, has resulted in numerous books exploring the Wombat's eternal capacity to find himself in trouble. Rescue by his friends of course is always predictable, especially by the fat-tailed pouched Mouse. The titles reflect their author's inventiveness in finding new challenges for her mildly naughty, muddled animal. Illustrated by Noela Young, the *Wombat* books have continued to delight generations of young readers. When the 'Wombat' series went off the air there were many protests,  but in 1981 and 1982 the ABC re-produced and re-broadcast some of the earlier episodes.

As with all Park's writing for younger readers, the *Wombat* series is written with children's interests and imaginations in mind, rather than adult perceptions of their needs. Books such as *Roger Bandy* (1977) and *When the Wind Changed* (1980) combine a lively sense of fun and an appreciation of the quirky with challenging approaches to well-worn attitudes. Whether drawing on her New Zealand experiences in *The Hole in the Hill* (1961); her interest in Australia's colonial past in *Come Danger, Come Darkness* (1978), *The Big Brass Key* (1983), *The Gigantic Balloon* (1975) and *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980); a perennial fascination with islands in *The Sixpenny Island* (1968), *My Sister Sif* (1986) and *Shaky Island* (1962); or exploring contemporary family problems in *Callie's Castle* (1974) and *Callie's Family* (1988), the same qualities sustain the interest of young readers. They include strong narrative interest, individual, unconventional characters and a frank acceptance of the dark underside of human behaviour and the vagaries of fortune.

Although Park's novels are never didactic, they implicitly emphasise the values of sensitivity, imagination, independence and courage, especially the courage to aspire. Many of her stories also subtly suggest the presence of mysterious forces in human destinies or imply numinous experience. *Playing Beatie Bow*, a remarkable 'time fantasy' which successfully juxtaposes Victorian Sydney in 1873 and contemporary Sydney and which was released as a film in 1985, is particularly successful in making the mysterious credible. Described by Meg Sorensen as being as 'near to the perfect book for a young reader as you could hope to get' (*Australian Book Review*, September 1992), it combines history, adventure, love interest and the mysterious workings of fate, while subtly recording a young girl's growth to maturity and understanding. In *Fishing in the Styx* Park records that the book's genesis lay in her fascination 30 years earlier with old photographs of the Rocks in Sydney, especially one particular photograph of a pale, sharp-faced little girl staring with 'slitted tiger eyes' and spirited defiance at the camera.

Park's fascination with history, particularly Sydney's, has also contributed to several unique, informative guides. Of these, *The Companion Guide to Sydney* (1973) is the most extensive. A record of Sydney before the developers changed large sections in the 1970s, it is the product of two years of research and of wandering from the city through to Windsor and the Hawkesbury, to South Head, Palm Beach and Kuring-gai Chase, to Woolloomooloo and Botany Bay. Including conversations with yesterday's forgotten diarists and old 'characters' of the present, and combining social history and a guide to the contemporary city, the *Companion* takes the reader on a series of thoughtful yet practical expeditions. Deeply and wittily expressive of the author's feeling for the city, the book is also critical of the insensitivity of its citizens, city fathers and miscellaneous bureaucrats.

This individual, expressive sense of place also informs Park's collaborations with illustrator Cedric Emanuel: *The Sydney We Love* (1983), *The Tasmania We Love* (1987) and *Norfolk Island and*

Lord Howe Island (1982). In *Fishing in the Styx* Park describes her preference for non-fiction writing and her love of research. As numerous readers have testified, *The Companion Guide to Sydney* is a particularly fine manifestation of the thorough scholarship and narrative individuality of her documentary writing. Another is *Der Goldene Bumerang* (The Golden Boomerang), a general guide to Australia, translated into Inuit but never published in English, which has sold consistently well in Germany, Holland and the Scandinavian countries.

Given Park's remarkable achievements as a writer over six decades and her unusual life story, we are fortunate that she was persuaded to write her own autobiography. The two volumes that have been published in recent years, *A Fence around the Cuckoo* and *Fishing in the Styx*, are highly distinguished additions to the rich genre of Australian autobiography.

The lighthearted *Drums Go Bang!* gave some insight into the triumphs and tribulations of writing for a living in 1940s Australia and into Park's relationship with Niland, but these later books are written from a far more complex and open perspective. What is glossed with humour and banter in the earlier book, is explored in depth in these later excursions. Deceptively simple, they are finely sensitive to issues of tone, voice and time, blending present and past with tact and discrimination. Both books demonstrate the same ability to capture people and places with vivid, lyrical immediacy and compressed economy as her fiction, and both express the same empathy with difference. Both are political as well as personal: they deal with discrimination, social evils, and official humbug and mismanagement. And *A Fence around the Cuckoo*, dealing as it does with the Great Depression, makes for a powerful social history.

If her autobiography is very much the story of her passion for writing, her development as the 'storyteller', it is also a story which belongs to others. As she admitted in an interview with Kate Veitch (*24 Hours*, December 1993), she subsequently realised from the reactions of readers that she

also 'happened to be a voice for a whole lot of people'. *Fishing in the Styx* takes up her story after marriage to Niland, and deals with both the ups and downs of their literary-marital partnership and the terrible aftermath of his death. The apt title is taken from its epigraph: 'The Styx is only *rumoured* to be a dark and terrifying river. Who has explored it? If you threw in a line, mightn't you pull out a golden fish?'

Park has made two further tributes to Niland: the edition of his short stories, the *Penguin Best Stories of D'Arcy Niland* (1987) and completion of his research into the life of Les Darcy, in the form of the biography, *Home Before Dark* (1995), written with Rafe Champion. It is based on Niland's immense collection of 'Darcyana'—books, photographs, clippings, letters, unpublished memoirs and taped interviews—and on subsequent research. In 1961 Niland and Park had spent time in the United States gathering information on Darcy's experiences there, talking with old boxers, trainers, promoters, companions, even the doctors who fought to save his life. Picking up where Niland left off, the biography is a carefully compiled chronicle of Darcy's short life as seen through the eyes of his contemporaries, which also throws light on the national life during the years of the Great War.

'Writing [is] a passion I have never understood', Park declares in *Fishing in the Styx*, yet 'a storyteller . . . is all I have ever wanted to be'. And in *A Fence around the Cuckoo* she describes her sense of having lived according to the 'confluence of two streams, literary and personal' and of having 'taken great risks for both'. Her importance to Australian literature has been acknowledged by numerous awards, including an Honorary Doctor of Letters in 1994 from the University of New South Wales, the Lloyd O'Neill Magpie Award for services to the Australian Book Industry in 1993 and her inclusion in the Order of Australia in 1987. But there is no doubt that the more real and lasting acknowledgement will be Ruth Park's continuing popularity with Australian and overseas readers of all ages.

Michael King

a fellow New Zealander pays tribute to Ruth Park's influence in the country of her birth



In 1945, the year I was born, Ruth Park had already lived in Australia for three years. And yet I have had a feeling all my conscious life of walking in her footsteps. First there were her poems in the back issues of the *Catholic School Journal*, almost the only reading resource we had in the country convent school I attended in the 1950s. I found more of her verse and stories in the secular magazines we accumulated at home in those days before television. As an adolescent I read *The Witch's Thorn* (1951) and *Pink Flannel* (1955).

Much more recently there were the autobiographies, especially *A Fence around the Cuckoo*, in which she revealed a sense of accord with the New Zealand landscape of her childhood, particularly the bush; and a profound empathy with and respect for the country's indigenous culture. Again the feeling: where I had been, Ruth Park had been before me and had seen and understood more.

For me, and others like me, she is a *kuiā*, an elder and shaman of the tribe—New Zealand, Irish, Catholic, literary—to which we belong. Her writing has illuminated my life in deep and unexpected ways. One of my few unfulfilled ambitions is to meet her. Alas, I foresee no advantages accruing to her from such an encounter. For me it would be an opportunity to express homage and gratitude on behalf of a following she may not even know she has in the land of her birth.

No reira, Ruth, tena koe. Ka nui te koa te mihi, ko te ngakau. E kui, e tuakana, tena koe, tena koe, tena ano hoki koe.

Elizabeth Riddell



writes on *A Fence around the Cuckoo*



What, essentially, we have to know about Ruth Park is contained in the dustjacket of *A Fence around the Cuckoo* (1992). The truth is in the innocent curve of the cheek, the softly folded mouth, the naive springy curls of hair over the forehead. Ruth Park as person and writer is safely here.

She has endured into the market with novels and children's books. *The Muddle-Headed Wombat* escapes me because I have no grandchildren to give him to. Her novels are not on my bookshelves because I have pressed them upon others to read and they have never returned them. (There must be an answer to this sort of over enthusiasm, but no one seems to have found it.) But I do have *A Fence around the Cuckoo*, the survivor of several copies. I cherish it for passages like this:

On a still hot morning . . . The tide went out and didn't come back in. This was not a spectacular event. The sea did not roll up like a scroll, like the sky in Revelations. It quietly withdrew . . . [We] were fooling around in the shallows in the dinghy at the time, and I felt this withdrawal abruptly, as though the water had been yanked away from underneath. We bumped and dragged on the stony bottom . . . The water went east, steadily and inexorably. There was no fuss of waves, no sound except gentle lapping. It went out so far we could no longer see it; there was a ruffling line of steely glitter in the middle of the Gulf, and that was all (p. 153).

This was the morning of the New Zealand earthquake that tumbled the Napier Cathedral to the ground. But Ruth and her little cousin, Fraser, and his dog known as 'the beard' were in the dinghy. If you look at a map you will see that on the beach at Glen Afra, on the Firth of Thames, which is itself on the Hauraki Gulf, one would not expect the landscape to change.

Ruth seems to have been always conscious of the enormous number of people in her life and of the family events that went on just over her head. These were not just family events, but events that in more formal situations would not have penetrated her childish day-to-day perceptions. This was partly because of the aunts. The aunts, her mother's sisters, leap off the page of *A Fence around the Cuckoo*—Wendela, Teresa, Rosina, and Auntie Willy who ran away from home when she was eighteen. The aunts had strong wills and fiery tempers. Their temperaments tended to make those of other women seem boringly low key. With scholarships and dogged attention to the children's pages of the New Zealand newspapers, Ruth got herself to high school in Auckland, where a nun spoke admiringly of an Australian boy named D'Arcy Niland, who was as keen—if that were possible—on writing as Ruth. The nun suggested they should write to one another, exchanging literary ideas, but Ruth had enough occupations and turned down the idea. Well, that's life for you. Fate, or Chance, is not to be disobeyed.


I first met D'Arcy when he was earning his living by day cleaning railway carriages and writing at night. I was putting together a little magazine, printed on rough newsprint, one of those little magazines that somehow seemed to survive through what was indeed the Great Depression that changed Australia even more than did Gallipoli. D'Arcy would sit opposite me at my modest editorial desk, alert for me to quiz him about some exotic word. 'Well, you know what it means', he would say. That made two of us; not enough, as he would admit. As well as enjoying all the plain beautiful words of the language, he was a pushover for the odd one out.

Language people, story tellers, I find in her what she found in him, 'a kind of stone age honesty, abrasive courage, durability'.


Marcie Muir

pays tribute to Ruth Park's writing for children and young adults



Ruth Park's books cannot always be easily found in children's libraries as they are so frequently out on loan. Naturally enough, most libraries have multiple copies of many of the books she published between 1961 and  and they are still eagerly read. As well as overseas editions in England and America, they were frequently translated at a time when publishing for an international market was less widespread.


Ruth Park is an unpretentious writer despite the acclaim which she had continued to receive for her work ever since *The Harp in the South* (1948) was the prizewinner in the *Sydney Morning Herald* competition in 1946. She is a dedicated professional, and children's books are only a part of her extensive output. Yet writing for children has always been important to her, since her early training on the children's pages of a large newspaper.

Park also worked extensively for radio for many years at the early stages of her career, and accepted diverse projects such as writing storybook texts for local and overseas educational publishers. Some of her earliest successes resulted in a radio serial written before any of her children's books were published.  of course, was 'The Muddle-Headed Wombat', that first appeared as a book in 1962 and continued until *The Muddle-Headed Wombat Stays at Home* was published in 1982. Not only was the serial successful for years as part of the children's session on radio, but the story in book form (with the distinctive and imaginative illustrations by Noela Young) had a following of its own. The books were reprinted many times: there would be 13 titles in the series, and the wildly exuberant adventures of Wombat and his friends continue to entertain young

Australians. It is remarkable that neither her imagination nor her vitality seemed to flag, and that her books were just as popular at the end of the series as at the beginning.

What comes first for Ruth Park has always been the story, and this is the strongest element in her writing. She has a compulsive narrative skill and holds her reader's attention firmly throughout. Even when the plot at times seems improbable, or coincidence is stretched too far for credibility, the writing is so taut the reader urgently needs to know what happens next. This quality characterises all her writing and is one of the reasons for her great success. Children want entertainment in their reading, and the story is what holds their interest most effectively. She also has a wonderful ear for dialogue. It reveals moods and feelings as well as the information being exchanged by the characters and is entirely in keeping with the person who is speaking. She must always have had a good ear and she admits she listens to children speaking. When writing *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980) she talked to 13-year-old girls, watching and listening to them to catch some idea of their reactions, preoccupations and expressions. She loves and understands children, having had five of her own, and has always enjoyed writing for them.

Some of Park's books are imbued with her love of history, and she inspires her readers with her own romantic vision of the past. In *Playing Beatie Bow* it is the imaginative power of the book which draws such a strong response. Her technique in creating the time slip is adroit and, once Abigail finds herself in the poor tenement area of late nineteenth century Sydney, the reader is spellbound by the atmosphere Park evokes. The story tightens its grip and carries one along powerfully. It is no wonder, as the diversity of awards it has won shows, that the book was so successful with readers in many countries, to be chosen for the best children's book of the year award in both Australia and the United States, and runner-up for the Guardian Prize in Britain, as well as gaining other distinctions, was remarkable. Some readers may have found the ending a little

pat and sentimental, but this helped its popular appeal. Certainly the book had achieved a wide circulation before the film was shown in 1986 and has flourished ever since. A recent check with Penguin Australia showed the paperback edition alone has sold almost 300 000 copies. 

Ruth Park has earned our respect for her other children's books, including *Callie's Castle* (1974), the first to be illustrated by her daughter, Kilmeny Niland. The great popularity of all these, including the *Muddle-Headed Wombat* (1962–82) series has made her name known to children all over Australia. The imaginative power in *Playing Beatie Bow* has endowed it with enduring qualities, and it may well prove to be one of the children's books of our era to continue to delight readers for many years to come.

Marion Halligan

writes on Ruth Park's novels: 'Some Sorcery in the Subconscious'



One of the delights of reading Ruth Park's autobiographies is the insight they offer into her novels. The rat, for instance, that in *Fishing in the Styx* (1993) sits on a window-sill, 'a composed leisurely rat . . . murderous as Set, a kitten-eater', the sneering and frightening but not otherwise harming rat we've already met in *The Harp in the South* (1948) nibbling a baby. It is ferociously murdered by the child's mother, the young and once more pregnant Roie, but not before it has run up under her skirt and needed to be beaten off. When Roie dies in childbirth shortly afterwards the reader remembers the rat and lives the horror of it all over again.

That's what fiction does. It takes the events of the writer's life—lived through, heard of, read about—and turns them into powerful stories. It's a process that Ruth Park is aware of, has lived through many times, but never takes for granted, never pretends to understand:

No one can truly tell how novels are written, least of all myself. Structure, plot, storyline, creation of many characters who must, absolutely must, walk, talk, and think for themselves—all that can be explained. But the primordium cannot be defined.

(Fishing in the Styx, p. 65)

Park is remembering how a child in a photograph of Sydney in 1899 stayed in her head for 30 years and emerged 'as a member of a family of decent immigrants called Bow, trying to keep up their standards in a decrepit slummocky antipodean city'. She tells us that she gazed at the photograph for hours: 'But why that child; how did I know her name was Beatie Bow? Some sorcery in the subconscious was operating in the trackless, wordless dark' (*Fishing in the Styx*, p. 65). This sorcery of Ruth Park's began its

ensorcelling some 50 years ago when she decided to enter the inaugural *Sydney Morning Herald* novel competition. She looked at her life, rejected most of it, particularly the New Zealand growing up, and decided: 'There was nothing left but Surry Hills. My life there had been like a visit to some antique island where the nineteenth century still prevailed' (*Fishing in the Styx*, p. 138). The result was *The Harp in the South*. When it won, Ruth Park probably wished that she lived in a place where even the nineteenth century held some sway, so bizarrely primitive was the reaction. I remember the furore, it's one of those things I've always known about, known from adults in hushed shocked gleeful voices talking about the scandal of this novel of the slums. What shocked me when I came to look at it again was the realisation that I was six at the time; it was clearly some scandal. That was in 1946.

Ruth Park wonders what caused the outcry. Jon Cleary, the runner-up, wrote about the slums of Sydney without attracting any censure. Ruth Park suggests that it was because she was a foreigner. I think it might also have been because she was a woman, and young at that: not nice, not ladylike, to know about such things, let alone write them. And perhaps there was an assumption that slums might be seen but should not be heard.

For what Ruth Park does, in this and in its sequel *Poor Man's Orange* (1949), its prequel, *Missus* (1985), and novels like *A Power of Roses* (1953), is give her people a voice. Raucous, perhaps, gaudily vernacular, but full of a beautiful energy. She writes with love, not shirking the terrible detail—the rats eating the babies' faces, the abortions, the marriages, the sore feet, childbirth, indigestion, rising damp, cancer, betrayals, drunkenness; showing humanity trying, struggling, making the best, weakening, failing—but always with compassion. Even the drunken men whom she shows breaking the hearts and bodies of their women are not simply blamed; it's the drink not the drunkard, the muscat made not from smiling vineyards but the industrial products of a Texan oil well, with sweepings of barrels and beetroot colouring, the drink that is a crime of society against the people who need its comfort.

You could see her novels as a set of monuments to the human spirit. *Swords and Crowns and Rings* which was published in 1977 and won the Miles Franklin Award, is located in the country rather than her beloved Sydney, but the theme of this story of a dwarf is still the tenacity of humanity's desire to live and not just survive. *Serpent's Delight* (1953), about a young woman who invents a vision of the Virgin Mary rather than leave home is more overtly easy-going, even comical, but finally pretty black. *Pink Flannel* (1955), renamed *Dear Hearts and Gentle People* (1981), is a 'piece of light music', beginning like a fairy story with an enchanted island, namely New Zealand, and a little weatherboard house under a vast walnut tree umbrella, telling a story of youthful aunts. As Uncle Puss of *A Power of Roses* says: 'It's a long hard life, but there's always something to keep the heart going . . . yes, it's a hard life, but there's a power of roses' (p. 157).

The vitality of Ruth Park's language is a marvel. She disports in it like a dolphin and so it looks easy, effortless. Like all the best art. She tells rich stories in rich words. Irish stories, for often 'The Irish in these people was like an old song, remembered only by the blood that ran deep and melancholy in veins for two generations Australian' (*The Harp in the South*, 1948, p. 417). I wonder whether the music of Ruth Park's writing owes something to the powerful persuasive rhythms of the Irish? With that syntax of misery and humour, and in the context of Catholicism, the religion that comforts and crucifies its people. Ruth Park tells us:

The world is full of novels in which characters simply *say* and *do*. There are certainly legitimate genres in which this is sufficient. But in real and lasting writing the character *is*.
(*Fishing in the Styx*, p. 222)

Ruth Park's readers can look back with gratitude for 50 years of novels which, along with their characters, have this powerful quality of 'isness', and give thanks for a pioneer who found a subject and a way to write about it, and in doing so taught us all to read and to see.



'a storyteller . . . is all I have ever wanted to be'





Ruth Park attends the opening of the first Housing Commission flats
in Devonshire Street, Surry Hills . . .





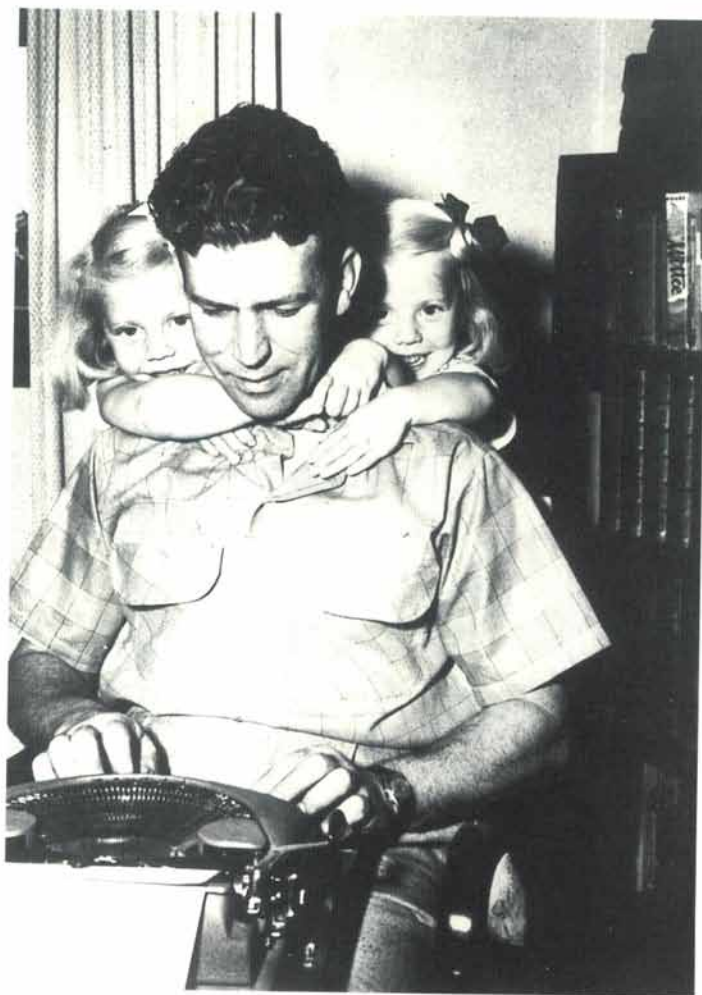
... and interviews residents about the new housing scheme





D'Arcy Niland with friend, writer Will Lawson





D'Arcy Niland with twin daughters Kilmeny and Deborah



A Select Bibliography



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Fishing in the Styx (Ringwood, Vic: Viking Australia 1993)

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- The Big Brass Key*, illustrated by Noela Young (Rydalmere, NSW: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983)
- Callie's Castle*, illustrated by Kilmeny Niland (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974)
- Callie's Family*, illustrated by Kilmeny Niland (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1988)
- Come Danger, Come Darkness*, illustrated by Tony Oliver
(Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978)
- The Gigantic Balloon*, illustrated by Kilmeny and Deborah Niland (Sydney: Collins, 1975)
- The Hole in the Hill*, illustrated by Jennifer Murray (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1961)
also published as *Secret of the Maori Cave*, illustrated by Michael A. Hampshire
(New York: Doubleday, 1961)
- James*, illustrated by Deborah Niland (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1991)
- Merchant Campbell*, illustrated by Edwina Bell (Australians in History series)
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- The Puffin Harp in the South* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1988)
- The Muddle-Headed Wombat*: separate listing on next page
- My Sister Sif* (Ringwood, Vic: Viking Kestrel, 1986)
- Nuki and the Sea Serpent: A Maori Legend*, illustrated by Zelma Blakely
(London: Longmans Young Books, 1969)
- Playing Beatie Bow* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1980),
(subsequently published in the UK, USA, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany)
- The Ring for the Sorcerer*, illustrated by William Stobbs (Sydney: Horwitz-Martin, 1967)

The Road to Christmas, illustrated by Noela Young

(London: Macmillan, 1962; New York: St Martin's Press, 1962)

The Road under the Sea, illustrated by Jennifer Murray (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1962)

Roger Bandy, illustrated by Deborah & Kilmeny Niland (Adelaide: Rigby, 1977)

The Runaway Bus, illustrated by Peter Tierney (Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton, 1969)

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(London: Macmillan, 1961; New York: St Martin's Press, 1961)

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When the Wind Changed, illustrated by Deborah Niland (Sydney: Collins, 1980)

The Muddle-Headed Wombat

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- The Muddle-Headed Wombat in the Snow*, illustrated by Noela Young
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- The Muddle-Headed Wombat on a Rainy Day*, illustrated by Noela Young
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- The Muddle Headed Wombat in the Springtime*, illustrated by Noela Young
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- The Muddle-Headed Wombat on the River*, illustrated by Noela Young
(Sydney: Educational Press, 1970)
- The Muddle-Headed Wombat and the Bush Band*, illustrated by Noela Young
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- The Muddle-Headed Wombat and the Invention*, illustrated by Noela Young
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- The Muddle-Headed Wombat on Clean-Up Day*, illustrated by Noela Young
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- The Adventures of the Muddle-Headed Wombat*, combined edition, illustrated by Noela Young
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(Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1982)

Awards



- 1946 *The Harp in the South* judged Best Novel in the inaugural *Sydney Morning Herald* competition
- 1954 *Serpent's Delight* selected as Catholic Book Club Choice
- 1961 British award for television play with D'Arcy Niland 'No Decision' in the inaugural Commonwealth Television Play Competition run by the Low Grade Organisation
- 1962 *The Hole in the Hill* highly commended in the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Book of the Year Awards
- 1975 *Callie's Castle* highly commended in the CBCA Book of the Year Awards
- 1977 *Swords and Crowns and Rings* won the Miles Franklin Award
- 1977 *Swords and Crowns and Rings* highly commended by the National Book Council
- 1979 *Come Danger, Come Darkness* highly commended in the CBCA Book of the Year Awards
- 1981 *Playing Beatie Bow* won the CBCA Book of the Year Award
- 1981 *When the Wind Changed* won the Children's Book Award in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards
- 1982 *Playing Beatie Bow* won the Parents' Choice Award for Literature, awarded by the Parents' Choice Foundation
- 1982 *Playing Beatie Bow* won the *Boston Globe-Horn* (USA) Book Award for fiction
- 1982 *Playing Beatie Bow* won the International Board on Books for Young People (Australia) Honour Diploma
- 1982 *Playing Beatie Bow* was the runner up for the Guardian Prize (UK)

- 1986 *When the Wind Changed*, illustrated by Deborah Niland, Young Australians' Best Book Award for a picture book
- 1987 Ruth Park made a Member of the Order of Australia
- 1992 *A Fence around the Cuckoo* won the *Age* Book of the Year Award for non-fiction
- 1992 *A Fence around the Cuckoo* won the Colin Roderick Award, presented with the H.T. Priestley Medal (Townsville Foundation for Australian Literary Studies Award)
- 1993 *A Fence around the Cuckoo* won the Tilly Aston Award for Braille Book of the Year
- 1993 *A Fence around the Cuckoo* won the Talking Book of the Year Award (Royal Blind Society)
- 1993 *Fishing in the Styx* won the Talking Book of the Year Award (Royal Blind Society)
- 1993 Awarded the Lloyd O'Neil Magpie Award for services to the Australian book industry
- 1994 *Playing Beatie Bow* won the COOL (Canberra's Own Outstanding List) Award
- 1994 Awarded Honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of New South Wales
- 1994 *Home Before Dark* won the Fellowship of Australian Writers Christina Stead Award







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