Out of the Box

The Art and Life of Emily Rodda

Celebrating 40 years in print

Jon Appleton

Jon Appleton was born in Sydney in 1974. At Naremburn Public School in the 1980s he discovered a world of Australian children's authors, and at SCECGS Redlands he created a magazine called *Rippa Reading* to celebrate their processes, personalities and prose. He moved to London in 1996, where he still lives, and is active in researching the history of children's books from 1970 in both the UK and Australia.

Also available is *Letters from Robin* (ISBN 978-1-7612-8017-7) about his friendship with the writer Robin Klein:

> [which] has an affinity with the English writer Spufford's *The Child That Books Built*, but this Antipodean book is more subtly stitched together … *Letters from Robin* offers a variety of riches, perhaps best of all in presenting a chronotope of that time when literature for the young burst into bloom in Australia. It has certainly sent me scurrying back to reread Robin Klein's books.
>
> Dr Robin Morrow, *Magpies*, March 2022

> *Letters from Robin* isn't just a beautiful appreciation of a beloved author's work and life; it's also a vivid picture of a thriving age of children's fiction. And it's a touching portrait of the unique literary friendship that evolved between young reader Jon Appleton and his pen pal, the great writer Robin Klein, and the impact her books and those of other children's authors, had on his life then and later. A real testament to the enduring power of children's literature.
>
> Sophie Masson

As well as reminding us of the Robin Klein books we loved and should revisit and alerting us to her books we haven't read, it is an excellent resource for students of Australian children's literature in schools and universities and those interested in writing for young people or in the field generally. For those with a history of reading Robin Klein's books, it also places us back into the time when we first read her memorable books.

Joy Lawn, paperbarkwords.blog

Letters from Robin is a wonderful testament to a great Australian author, and the world of Australian children's literature in general. Reading about Appleton's own literary journey resurrected so many wonderful memories of my own in the world of Australian children's literature, and reminded me of just how ground-breaking much of what we were doing really was.

Mike Botham, Children's Librarian, Teacher/Librarian, Broadcaster.

Out of the Box: The Art and Life of Emily Rodda continues his investigation into the influential publishers and creators of Australian children's books which are universally accepted as the best in the English-language world.

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Out of the Box

The Art and Life of Emily Rodda

Jon Appleton

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For Belle Alderman

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Questing

A bright light suddenly filled the room. When my vision cleared, I saw what I had come to find. I was in a lecture room but there was no sign of students; only the furniture remained. The desks were configured in a horseshoe shape with the curve furthest away from me. Sitting on the desks was a series of dove-grey boxes, all identical, all equally spaced. My mind leaped over the maths – perhaps there were twenty-five or thirty of them.

I heard the door click shut behind me and then the clip of footsteps gradually receded. Distantly, I heard another door open and close and then another. The footsteps vanished. All was quiet.

The footsteps belonged to Belle Alderman, my host and guardian, who is also Director of the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature (NCACL), which began life as the Lu Rees Archives way back in 1974. The centre is a treasure trove of resources about Australian children's authors, illustrators and publishers, showcasing their creative work in comprehensive research files and a library – comprising nearly 60,000 volumes – of Australian and overseas editions of books.

Leaving me in this subterranean room in an otherwise deserted block at the University of Canberra – it was

November, term was over – Belle was returning to the sunny uplands of the ground floor. *That's* where the NCACL runs its office in the space allocated by the university. Their formidable archives, chronicling the history of Australian children's literature as nowhere else does, were in various rooms in the building, tamed in filing cabinets and plan chests and on shelves in the library.

The dove-grey boxes weren't *quite* identical, I realised on closer inspection, for each bore a unique number. Positioned in the middle of the horseshoe was a printed copy of a very significant document. It was labelled 'A Guide to the Papers of Emily Rodda'. The Guide listed the contents of each box, within which were clearly labelled folders. If I'd hoped for the document to be on ancient parchment, written by Doran the Dragonlover or Josef, Palace Librarian, perhaps locked away or buried and forgotten, perhaps with sections missing or distorted with age so that I'd have to use guesswork, then I was out of luck. I had a firm route map, although I couldn't help straying from one folder to another.

But then what is a quest without deviations from reliable pathways? And, as with all good quests, time was of the essence. I had two days to look through everything – less than two days, to be exact, taking into account travel time from Sydney to Canberra and then from the city centre out to suburban Bruce – could there be a more persuasively Australian suburb name? – and back again.

I'd arrived in Canberra knowing that Emily Rodda is the pen-name of Jennifer Rowe, one of Australia's most successful and popular writers. She has written more than

110 titles over a 40-year career so far – 2024 marks the anniversary. In addition, she has had a notable career as a book editor and publisher, at Angus & Robertson (1973–88), when it was one of Australia's leading independent publishers, and as the editor of *The Australian Women's Weekly* (1988–92). Aside from the pleasures of reading, Emily fascinated me because of her high profile in the micro world of Australian children's publishing – a field I had immersed myself in from a young age, as founder and editor of *Rippa Reading*, an authors' fan magazine for other children and book enthusiasts, published from my school in Sydney – and the macro world of Australian publishing.

Emily Rodda is best known for Deltora Quest, the epic high fantasy sequence (2000–2016) which inspired (with apologies …) the opening paragraphs above, but she has also written picture book texts, a young adult novel, chapter books for newly confident readers, other high and low fantasies. There are adult novels: the Verity Birdwood sequence (five novels plus a short-story collection), the Tessa Vance series (two novels and dozens of treatments for prime-time TV), a stand-alone comedy/mystery and a collection of fairy tales for grown-ups. Her versatility is remarkable.

She is widely admired in the publishing world. Margaret Wild, who has been Emily's colleague and editor, and a long-standing friend, told me:

> I was very much in awe of her both as a publisher and an author. She managed not only to have a very demanding, responsible job, but was rearing four children and

writing her books late into the night. I was also writing at night, but my stories were short picture-book texts, whereas hers were complicated novels. And, of course, she was also writing crime novels for adults. I don't know how she did it all!

Her work is incredible. Her books are critically acclaimed, as well as being enormously popular with children. Try borrowing one of her books at the library – impossible! They're all out, being read by her legion of fans. I've often felt *I'd* love to be a ten-year-old reader again, immersing myself in her wonderful worlds.

She manages to be endlessly inventive and versatile. Her characters are likeable and engaging, and her stories have clever, imaginative plots and irresistible elements such as adventure, fantasy, magic and humour.

Celia Jellett, who had a long association with publishers Omnibus Books, has been Emily Rodda's primary editor since the Rondo trilogy (2007–2009). She edited the Star of Deltora quartet and the playful young fiction series, Monty's Island, as well as the most recent stand-alone novels and Emily's brand-new work, *Landovel*, which will be released in October 2024. Celia explained:

I enjoy being transported by Emily's worlds and the characters in them. When I first started, I read the Deltora Quest books as my commuting reads, and was lucky that I didn't miss my stop. As a seasoned and

> even cynical reader I don't like to feel that I'm being manipulated to feel a certain way, but Emily connects so well that I hardly notice. I'm right there. I still don't know how she does it. [Her] stories are never predictable and on a first read I am often surprised where the story has taken me.

The boxes contained the archives of the first thirty years of the author's career, which she had donated to the NCACL under the federal government's Cultural Gifts programme. The author retains copyright in her material, but the papers belong to the nation now.

There is something poignant about an archive since the Coronavirus pandemic. After six years as a freelance editor, in 2022 I returned to an in-house role and noticed a difference. Owing to hybrid working models, nobody has a permanent space any more, or leaves piles of paper out on desks or on top of filing cabinets. You don't want to lug hefty page proofs to and from the office, so you don't print them out. Everyone edits PDFs onscreen. We used to *drown* in paper before Covid. I missed those teetering stacks and piles.

Here there were pages galore. Some of the folders contained slippery sheafs of fax paper – remember them? – shiny as dragon scales, conveying queries from a printer seeking fonts that hadn't been supplied with a disk or arranging a time for a phone call in the days before email. There were formal editorial letters headed by publishers' colophons – like royal seals – and internal company memos on coloured dockets. There were proposals and

briefs and pages and pages of illustrations, from rough sketches annotated with comments to scans of final art. There were paste-ups: the typeset text of *Something Special*, Emily Rodda's first book, glued onto blue grid paper to be filmed at the printer's ready for press.

As well as paper, there was *stuff*. Gimmicky merchandise, like figurines and collector cards and holographic sticker sheets, often produced by publishers in America and Japan where Emily Rodda has had phenomenal success. I remember from my own early years working in publishing when this sort of marketing was coming into play. It started with covermounts on magazines – bulky freebies stuck to the magazine's cover and sealed in a polythene bag. (Before the covermounts there were binders – remember the TV ads: 'Get your free binder with issue one from your newsagent!') The Deltora Quest series was a perfect vehicle for this kind of marketing. It doesn't feel cynical, because collecting is at the heart of the series.

My favourite finds in the NCACL archives were Emily's notebooks. I'd always known about them but seeing them was special. Many writers fetishise stationery, indulging in beautiful tomes with marbled covers, ribbon markers and creamy paper to add a touch of ceremony to starting a new writing project. Not Emily Rodda. 'My handbag is always full of serviettes or scrappy bits of paper with notes on them,' she told journalist Dianne Dempsey in 1992.[1] She always freely admitted to using her kids' old exercise books, flipped over and repurposed. Rammed into folders in the dove-grey boxes, they bulged

with stuck-in slips of paper from when she had a sudden idea in a hotel room or at a bus stop or in a café. The handwriting always seemed neat, and the notes were as detailed as they needed to be. There were diagrams, and lists – of places, character names, even alternative plotlines. The notebooks, though old, bristled with creativity.

It struck me that while free of fetish or affectation, how deliciously strategic and *subversive* it was to lay the foundations of a sprawling new world within the dull covers of a tall, narrow ledger designed, for example, for expenses. Because you'd be breaking out of those rigid columns in no time but outwardly nobody would have a clue what you were doing. Which I think suited the author very well.

The volume of material was thrilling and potentially overwhelming. I'd brought the fattest A4 notebook I could find because it felt right to work in longhand, knowing that the author's stories began that way, often just as notes that sometimes had to wait years until they arrived at their true form. I began scribbling fast, recording details from correspondence and synopses and proposals, but soon started snapping pictures with the camera on my phone, because there was so much of importance and interest. I knew I'd relish transcribing it at home in the weeks and months to come, in an effort to fully appreciate and chronicle this major literary legacy.

Another resource I had was the interview I'd conducted with the author, just days after my Canberra trip. On a bright and cold November morning, I went

to Leura, in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, to the house the author shares with Bob Ryan, her husband of thirty years (who she met when both worked at *The Australian Women's Weekly*), and their golden Labrador, Sadie, to talk about her life and work.

'What exactly are you looking for?' Belle Alderman had asked benignly as she escorted me from the uplands to the underworld at Canberra University.

This excellent question had consumed me for over a year, since I'd embarked on the hugely enjoyable task of rereading or filling in gaps in my knowledge of the Rodda/Rowe canon. I'd *always* read her: I was almost ten when *Something Special* was published, so slightly older than its core audience but I loved it and the books that followed. I was twelve when *Grim Pickings*, her first crime novel, came out, which seems to be the age at which a lot of lifelong crime fiction fans start reading grown-up mysteries, following on from books by Enid Blyton.

By the time I was in my thirties in the mid-2000s, many of the writers I'd loved as a child had retired or moved on to other kinds of writing. Some favourites, like Colin Thiele and Caroline Macdonald, had died. But the Emily Rodda books kept coming, kept being shortlisted for and awarded prizes and, best of all, were still deemed relevant and were adored by new generations of Australian kids.

I'm not alone in remaining devoted to her books into adulthood. When the *Guardian Australia* invited readers to send in video clips of themselves posing questions for their beloved author in 2020, there were children as

young as seven right up to fans of 28 pitching in.[2] Zoom offered state-of-the-art communication with an author whose website is rarely updated, who isn't on TikTok or Facebook and who suggests, if fans want to get in touch, they might send letters via snail mail. Just as I had done more than thirty years ago.

The first thing I was looking for, I realised, was the secret that amazed both Margaret Wild and Celia Jellett (and plenty of other people). How did she do it? And how does Emily *continue* to hold her readers spellbound – those who are new to her work as well as us long-term fans – forty years after she began?

As I read my way through the books, a second investigation began. It's not essential to know a single thing about a favourite writer to enjoy their books – in some cases, discovering personal facts can completely reverse a devotion. Like most authors, Emily prefers to let her books speak for her, rather than to talk about them or indeed about herself. But when you read your way through a beloved author's backlist, often you keep coming across common themes and experiences in book after book. You can't help but wonder a) is the writer just repeating herself? or b) is she actually giving us insights into her own highly developed interior life? Option a) would be dull and not worth spending much time on at all – and I really *don't* think this author falls into category a). I think b) is very much at play here.

Another much-loved author, who wrote for adults and children for over half a century, once said, 'I try to make sense of the times I have lived through by writing stories

… And sometimes it seems that I only understand what I really think and feel when I see what I have written.' (I'll tell you who this author is later in the book.) Further, this author suggested that, if read in sequence, 'a writer's work may be a coded autobiography'. Not that the writer has cast herself as a character, 'just that everywhere, slipped in – there is something discussed or commented on that was of passionate interest to me at the time.' When the author in question writes often about clues and puzzles, as Emily does, surely it's even more tempting to see the fiction as a coded record, with veils for privacy, perhaps, of their life?

Before we go any further, there's one other question I need to resolve. What to call the author in this book? Even now, the dual identities bemuse interviewers who inevitably ask, 'Do I call you Emily or Jennifer?' Some years ago, she acknowledged she was better known as Emily Rodda than herself – 'mostly I don't mind at all. It actually gives you a kind of privacy going about your life.' But these days she is accepting. 'Kids call me Emilyrodda [all one word] which I love,' she has said.

So Emily it is.

1

Reality and Myth

'In Sydney in the mid-1980s,' thrilled Jane Wheatley in *Good Weekend* magazine in 1997, 'there was one particular woman other women would insist on telling you about. She had the top job in Australian publishing, she wrote prize-winning books while her four young children were asleep …[1]

It would become an open secret that Angus & Robertson's children's publisher Jennifer Rowe was also the author Emily Rodda, but very few people knew it when her debut novel, *Something Special*, was published in 1984.

Back then, Emily was mother to Kate, aged seven, and Hal, aged two. Kate could read independently but Emily was reading aloud to her younger brother. Perhaps Kate wanted the exclusive attention of her very busy mother. Maybe that was why she asked Emily to make up stories about their life together.

One night, as Emily left Kate's bedroom, she reflected on the story she'd just told her. It was about a mother and daughter running a clothes stall at a school fete. It wasn't bad at all, Emily thought. Kate asked for it again and it lost nothing in the retelling. So Emily decided to write it down. Then she had it typed up and took a risk.

She sent it to the readers at Angus & Robertson, whom she knew and whose judgement she trusted as an editor. They were the people who sifted through the thousands of manuscripts would-be authors submitted, in the hope of being published. At first Emily used 'Shiela Voigt of Brighton, Victoria' as her pseudonym, but she eventually settled on Emily Rodda, which was her grandmother's maiden name and her great-grandmother's married name.

The editors at A&R liked the book so Emily had to ask her boss, Richard Walsh, about the possibility of publishing it. 'Get in touch with this woman,' he commanded, 'and find out if she's got any more stories in her' (publishers rarely invest in a one-trick pony). And that was when Emily felt duty-bound to confess that she was in fact the author.

The story goes, Walsh said, 'What fun! Let's do it and we'll keep it a secret.' So, until and beyond publication, very few members of staff at A&R knew who Emily Rodda really was. It was only when *Something Special* won the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Junior Book of the Year Award that Walsh's excitement and pride overflowed, and he told everyone.[2]

Was there an element of mischief at play too? As Emily told Lisa Forrest on ABC Radio National's *Nightlife: The Writers* in 2020: 'I'm devious! I liked the idea of the people I worked with reading it, but I didn't want them to know it was me.'[3] And for someone who likes puzzles and mysteries – anagrams and codes especially – the use of a pseudonym feels utterly appropriate.

Perhaps it's no surprise that journalists of the day

were keen to invent their *own* versions of Jennifer Rowe in interviews and profiles. There is a plethora of material archived at the National Library in Canberra which provided a third source of information in my quest to document Emily's career.

These journos would write about her many promotions at work, sales of her books overseas, TV adaptations, and prizes. The fact that she had *two* jobs (though writing, in the early days, was considered more of an 'indulgence' than a job), plus a third and fourth as a mother and wife, and for a time was the family's sole breadwinner, were subjects of constant fascination. Because hers weren't just any jobs. Over fourteen years at A&R, Emily rose through the ranks to lead first the children's department and then the whole Australian publishing division, before leaving to edit *The Australian Women's Weekly* early in 1988.

She had been asked by Richard Walsh, who had moved from books to magazines to head up Australian Consolidated Press (now ARE Media). Here's how Emily described the career move: 'I was around 40, the time when a lot of people make a jump – make a change – and I was asked to do it and I sort of thought, *Why not?* in that terrible, insouciant way you do when you're at that age and looking for a new challenge.'[4]

Another journalist, Jane Cadzow, suggested that if our beloved author 'were not such an engaging and eminently sane person, it would be tempting to write her off as a chronic over-achiever … Definitely superwoman material'.[5] But Emily, then 38, was 'so

relaxed about the whole thing it is impossible to hold her super-efficiency against her'.

Time and again, Emily played down the heroic image. When journalist Karen Spresser interviewed her in 1992, Emily laughed heartily at the idea of people calling her 'a superwoman'.[6] She made it clear that she found it embarrassing that people could 'land her with such a tag'. She openly admitted she had domestic help and childcare, and that her mother helped, too, even doing the shopping for a period of time.

Emily could be self-deprecating to the point of self-parody. In the late 1980s, a typical homecoming at the end of the day apparently ran like this, in the account Emily gave another journalist from *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

> … as you walk in the door [the children] throw themselves at you. My daughter tries to tell me what's happened at school, my six-year-old's first question is always 'what's for dinner?' and my twins are hanging off my legs saying 'chips, chips'. That's why my friends laugh about this superwoman business. I'm just glad I'm not editor of *House and Garden*.[7]

Nevertheless, Emily was always required to explain how she managed to keep all the balls in the air. She told Jennifer Byrne, in a profile for *The Bulletin*: 'All I can say is my standards of housekeeping are not very high. Both my husband and I know that childhood does pass and we should enjoy them while they are little and put up with the mess …'[8]

Refreshingly, Emily's colleagues not only rejected the superwoman myth, but did their best to assist her with her public image. Until she entered the world of magazines, Emily admitted that her wardrobe was 'very ordinary, respectable. It wasn't quite fancy enough for *The Weekly*.'

She laughed as she added: 'It was quite funny how, so tactfully and so carefully, the women gradually changed me.' She started wearing high heels, and for a time even sported a perm. In fact her fellow staff members were fiercely protective of her. Jane Wheatley revealed that 'a former colleague at *The Weekly* told *Good Weekend*, "We used to check her before she went out to make sure she had matching shoes on, and her petticoat wasn't showing and there wasn't a splodge of Farex on her shoulder."'[9]

Did they see her as a little naïve and vulnerable? If you were a *children's* writer, in those days, you were expected to be 'wholesome' and often found yourself being slightly patronised. ('When are you going to write a *real* book?', meaning one for adults, was a common question.) Jane Wheatley's 1997 article concluded her assessment of Emily's accomplishments with 'and (brace yourself) she was *nice* …' Imbuing and conveying a sense of optimism was part of the job description too.

In Steve McLeod's profile in the Sunday *Age* in 1989, Emily revealed that some of the staff at *The Weekly* 'call me Pollyanna and I do tend to look on the bright side of things, but I really believe that works'. She went on to say:

> On a very small scale, if you work full-time with four children you get into terrible messes. One thing I know is that if you give up, you're stuffed. The only thing that can save you is if you get a sense of energy back in your life, so you can clean it up. That helps in my family life and here at work. It's not everyone's cup of tea, and I think we need cynics as well, but I think people can get infected with your optimism.[10]

No wonder it took journalists by surprise when the writer's crime fiction – albeit of the cosier, golden-age kind – suddenly gained attention. First, her adult novel *Grim Pickings* hit the small screen in 1989, and then a second novel, *Murder by the Book*, was released.

With their over-emphasis on the difficulty of balancing domesticity with creativity, evoking a rather chaotic home life, these media portrayals say more about how successful, working women were viewed in Australia in the 80s and 90s than about their subject. Emily just let them get on with it, while *she* got on with what she did so well.

A year or so before Emily joined *The Weekly*, her twin sons, Alex and Clem, were born. From then on, she quipped, 'it wasn't so much a matter of management as of survival'. But there was more to it than that. She told the Melbourne *Age*, 'After I had the twins, I started to think that nothing was impossible … And being responsible for other lives makes you less concerned about how you look to other people.'[11] She has also said, 'On a personal level, I'm lucky in that I do have a lot of physical stamina, and

I'm good at compartmentalising. I had three areas of my life – work, family and writing – and I was continually refreshed by moving among them.'[12]

Emily described dividing up a typical day: leave work at 4.30 pm (when Alex and Clem were small); family time; then at 10pm she'd begin writing, three nights a week. She would drive home in a state of anticipation: 'Tonight's the night!'

I'm struck by this idea of compartments. Emily has so often written about islands – from the Deltora chronicles to Monty's Island – and boxes, like *Eliza Vanda's Button Box* and the music box of Rondo. (Books which I will write about in more detail.) And doors which lead into compartments. Even the way she describes her beloved Blue Mountains as 'a string of small villages, linked by a highway and a railway line, tiny dots in a vast expanse of National Park' brings connected compartments to mind.

Emily Rodda's literary output can also be divided up and placed in a sequence. For the first decade, before she became a full-time writer in 1993, she produced stand-alone novels for middle-grade readers in alternate years. Each of them, published first in hardback with line drawings by Noela Young, won the CBCA's Book of the Year Award for Younger Readers.[13]

She describes these low fantasies as 'magical reality'. Children from this world are transported into other realms to reunite and reorder fractured regimes; and in so doing, they repair a fissure in their own lives. She alternated these with adult mysteries, all stand-alone but featuring ABC researcher turned amateur sleuth, thirty-

something Verity Birdwood. At the end of the 2010s, she returned to magical reality with consecutive titles, *The Shop at Hoopers Bend, His Name Was Walter* and *Eliza Vanda's Button Box*; and now she is also returning to crime fiction. Unquestionably, the middle years of her career were dominated by the Deltora Quest books, which became a publishing phenomenon.

And yet there are undeniable connections between Emily's books which are never clearer than in their endings. In her second Emily Rodda novel, *Pigs Might Fly*, Sandy the signwriter draws Rachel a unicorn picture and as she drifts – in the way we do when we're ill – she finds, as words float through her mind, the unicorn spiriting her away. It turns out he's Alexander the bank teller who disappeared during a storm. ('I've met you before' is a line from the much later novel, *The Shop at Hoopers Bend,* that echoes through the titles published before and after it.) In *The Key to Rondo*, Spoiler, the pickpocket, a character rendered in artwork, turns out to be a real-life ne'er-do-well, distant cousin George. The bonds revealed at the end of *The Glimme* are even closer to home. In all these stories, characters have as much a place, a role, in other times as in their own.

But it's too soon to talk about endings. I think this book will be a journey in and out of compartments. Each book is like its own box, and I'll be moving back and forth between books as reading one leads me to think about another. (There's a list of all the titles and their publication dates at the back of this book.)

I can't open every box. In life, as in fiction, time is

always an issue, and I want this tribute to be available in time not only for Emily's fortieth anniversary as a published writer but also for the fiftieth anniversary of the NCACL. Think of this as a twinned celebration (twins are pretty significant in her stories and life).

Some boxes will remain closed because I want to focus on the books that strike me as most revealing of her art and intentions, or the ones that seem to reach across the years and genres and add details to a broader picture of life in Australia or life in the story world (or both). And a lot of her books are in series, which you might choose to read sequentially or dip in and out of. There will be plenty of boxes left for *you* to unpack.

I'm mindful, too, of spoilers. Interviewers invariably ask writers what their books are about (especially if they haven't read them). During an interview about *The Shop at Hoopers Bend*, Emily dutifully described the plot before pausing, and saying with an endearing, placatory smile: 'I don't know how much to explain because I hate telling my stories. I want people to read them for themselves.'[14]

I'm about to dive in and I can't wait. In which box will we find Emily and ourselves at the end?

Let the quest begin.

2

Secrets and Lives

Emily Rodda's Rondo trilogy unites cousins Leo and Mimi, who are forced into a tense, secret partnership when they end up being transported to a fantastical land which until now has existed only in images on the panels of a music box. This family heirloom has been left to Leo by his great-aunt Bethany. Rondo is ruled by the evil Blue Queen and she is deeply angered by the cousins' arrival because she has a long-standing dispute with their family, the Langlanders. On each of the three occasions Leo and Mimi are compelled to return to Rondo, saving their friends (a motley crew of animals and people) and themselves becomes more challenging.

One of the most interesting characters is someone readers never get to meet. That's because Great-Aunt Bethany dies before the end of the first chapter of the first book. Nothing dramatic happened. She was watching TV when she 'quietly stopped breathing, aged ninety-four, her plump little hands peacefully folded on her lap, and tea growing cold in a cup on a table beside her.' TV is pretty important in Emily Rodda's story world, as we'll discover, and I wouldn't be surprised if Bethany had been watching a quiz show.

Bethany was fussy and fastidious, a creature of habit,

but this belied her truly remarkable role in the family. As the oldest living member of the Langlanders, she was the repository of all the richest family stories – like those about 'glamorous, scandalous Alice Langlander, who had played the harp and ended up joining a circus', and the family disgrace, 'wicked uncle George', who had two brothers, including 'the famous Uncle Henry who had left Aunt Bethany the music box' (gifted to him by ancestor Rollo, the 'great traveller').

It's not surprising to learn that Emily Rodda grew up in the shadow of her own formidable great-aunts. 'They were never backward in coming forward to my poor mum,' Emily told me wryly. When they saw three-year-old Emily reading *The Saggy Baggy Elephant* – or rather reciting it, because she'd heard the story so many times she had committed it to memory – they said, 'She'll strain her little brain doing that! You should stop her!' Emily added, 'Mum never did stop me – never stopped me doing anything – but they were very concerned. They thought female brains weren't made for it.' Not only that …

> They were very keen on being respectable and good – so was Mum, really – so what I found – as I'm sure a lot of women of my generation found – was that you were living two lives. I knew perfectly well how to act in a good way. Just don't say what's on your mind.

If she did say something that was considered out of turn, it was met with disapproval. *Their* Emily wouldn't say that! But I have to tell you that, at the end of my

visit to Emily's house in Leura, she showed me an old, framed black and white photograph of the great-aunts as children. There was more than a hint of mischief in their otherwise pleasant demeanours. I'll bet they gave the photographer the runaround that day.

Emily – born on 2 April 1948 – quickly learned when to share and when to keep quiet, both at home and at school. She's sanguine about it now.

> How many of us have secret lives? We all do. It can be very enriching, but as I've got older I've realised, it would have been nice to have felt totally at home in your skin. But I can't say I was unhappy, I wasn't. I just took it for granted.

And so although she had to wait till her mid-thirties before her new (inherited) name gave her a distinct voice to write for publication, it seems to me that Emily Rodda has *always* been someone else as well.

She is a descendant of the astronomer, John Tebbutt (1834–1916), whose grandfather, also called John Tebbutt, had arrived from England as a free settler in 1801 aboard the *Nile*, and settled on a farm in Windsor. The younger John Tebbutt married Jane Prendergast in 1857 and they had six daughters and a son. Their fourth child was Emily Tebbutt (1863–1953), who married Frank Rodda: Emily's great-grandparents. The Roddas originated from Cornwall in England, where the name is still found today, and where a branch of the family have been making and selling much sought after clotted cream since 1890.

In Emily Rodda's high fantasy stories, the oral tradition of storytelling from one generation to the next provides a vital link across time. Emily's own family weren't so keen on reading fairy tales and fables but relished telling anecdotes about real life. 'There were lots of tales about the big family house at Windsor where my grandmother and all the great-aunts were born,' she told me. 'The person who inherited it after Grandpa died had pulled the cedar panelling off the hallway and burned it and underneath came showering all these gold sovereigns that had been hidden there.'

Perhaps telling outrageous tales about the family offered ways to be counted and listened to as Australia emerged from its prim conservatism after the Second World War. These febrile family claims have found their way down to the current generation and they crop up now and then in family conversations. Recently, daughter Kate asked, 'Who was the uncle who lost his arm by sticking it out the truck window?' Often the stories were cautionary tales, like the one 'about Aunty Ginnie who leaned back in her chair and bit her tongue'.

Emily's early years were spent in Sydney's North Shore suburb of Roseville. Her father, Jim Oswin (1924–2005), had served as a pilot in the RAAF during the Second World War before beginning a long and distinguished media career in Australia. Her mother, Frances, had been in the WRENS (the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service) during the war, but once she married at 24 became a full-time mother and homemaker.

Emily never got the sense her mother hankered after a career of her own, although Frances offered invaluable support during her husband's long and industrious, high-profile career in the Australian media. But Frances' parents would have frowned on her seeking a role of her own. It was they who vetoed Emily attending kindergarten, so she missed out entirely on that formative stage of education. 'I started school before I was five because I was an April baby,' she told me. Attending school clearly came as something of a shock because, until then, 'I just entertained myself. So when I got bored I just walked home,' she laughed, then continued, 'which got me into all sorts of trouble!

> Those were the days when things were perhaps a little more rigid than they are now. One of the first things we had to do was paint a picture. They gave us big sheets of paper and an easel. I'd never seen big sheets of paper because I'd just been working from home where I had coloured pencils and little paints. I'd never dealt with pots of paint and big spaces. I didn't really know what to do with it. I drew this rather angular lady in front of an ironing board and then I wrote under it, 'Mother ironing with our cat', in paint. First the teacher said, "You haven't filled the whole page with your painting, so that means you're not creative." Everyone else had because they'd been to kindergarten and knew what you were supposed to do. Then she said, "And we're not up to writing yet."

> I was crushed! From that moment on, I was paralysed when it came to drawing. Sometimes people ask me, 'Do you draw your own pictures?' What a joke! The most I do is these incredibly childish little outlines that some poor artist has got to interpret.

While her artistic skills might not have passed muster, her literacy skills were already advanced by then. 'I remember my very first school reading book was called *Happy Holidays*. My father covered it in green paper … It was like, 'Run, Bob, run' – that kind of stuff,' she told me. 'I dutifully read this book at school but at home I was reading about Pookie the rabbit with wings.'

Jim Oswin had joined the *Sun* newspaper in Sydney and was then asked to become the manager of Melbourne radio station 3AW – which was in decline – so he moved the family to Victoria.

Emily explained, 'He was young and full of confidence and he did, he got the ratings up and turned it round.' The Oswins spent around eighteen months in Melbourne before Jim accepted his next challenge as general manager of Channel 7 in Sydney. (In those days, there were no national television networks, only affiliated stations based in the capital cities.)

Back on the Upper North Shore, now in Killara, Emily settled down to formal education in Year 2 (having been to two different schools in Melbourne). During those years, she began making up stories, often while wandering through the dense bushland surrounding Killara in the

1950s. She was well aware of the disparity between her real-life location, and the settings of the stories she read. In fact, she thought …

> When I was a child in Sydney, spring never seemed special. In those days, dive-bombing magpies and the white froth on the backyard plum tree were just signs that soon it would be the real season – summer. Freedom, Christmas, bare feet and the beach.
>
> It was different in the books I read. They were mostly set in a fantasy place where creeks were called 'streams' and you ate jam sandwiches for tea. In that place it snowed in winter and you put out crumbs for the robins. There, spring was really something – bluebell woods, budding hedges in soon-to-be-green and shaded lanes, hosts of golden daffodils.[1]

Television arrived in Australia in 1956, when Emily was in Year 4, so apart from reading, there was little to keep kids indoors. Children were left to their own devices. Emily smiled as she remembered, 'It's funny to think of it because parents now would never say, "Just come home when it's dark," would they? We used to go off wandering, making cubbies.'

While Emily and her friends were treated well by their parents, she has mixed feelings about those parent/child relationships. Parents just didn't play with their children, and 'while it's wonderful the way parents these days spend masses of time with their children playing games or

making models, there was something quite fertile about just wandering and thinking and making stuff up, by yourself or with friends,' she told me.

At home, unvetted, she read the length and breadth of her parents' shelves. 'You really only got given books for your birthday or Christmas – people would buy you Little Golden Books – so I belonged to five libraries. We all did.' In the 1950s, there just wasn't the choice of new books for young readers that there came to be a decade later. So Emily began making up stories to tell her younger brothers; Ron is three years younger and Martin is Emily's junior by a decade.

Emily discovered Australian writers, such as May Gibbs with *The Complete Adventures of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*. 'I still think of the Banksia Men …' she mused. As she got older, she read Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians*, but also the American Bobbsey Twins books, and Kate Douglas Wiggins' *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. 'My mother had the whole of the *Anne of Green Gables* series from when she was little.' Then there was the ubiquitous – but inspirational for any future crime writer – Enid Blyton. And endless iterations of traditional tales. At the end of Year 5, Emily and a friend discovered *Jane Eyre* and loved it. 'We talked about it a lot.'

By the time she started high school, Emily was regularly receiving praise for her writing, and she began committing her stories to paper in a little book. 'As I got older things got much more romantic – I mean, sickeningly romantic in the middle teens!' she laughed. 'I would write down the way something happened, like a diary, and then

I'd write a highly romanticised story based on this.'

(There's a residual touch of the romantic in Emily Rodda, I think, which finds its way into her generally robust, logical stories. Think of Quil's reaction to the little shop in Hoopers Bend: 'And she fell in love. It was as simple as that. Afterwards, she decided that it was like being under a spell. It was as if she'd stumbled into a fairy cave in a story – one of those enchanted grottos you never want to leave, where years seem like a day. At the time, she thought of one thing and one thing only – she had to stay here. Somehow she had to find a way to stay.')

Sadly, when Emily discovered the truly great writers she reveres to this day – she still prefers plot-driven narratives, like nineteenth-century novels and modern books like A.S. Byatt's *Possession* to slice-of-life approaches – she decided her long-held ambition to become a writer was as unrealistic as her little brother wanting to be an astronaut. (In *The Best-Kept Secret*, we meet Simon, a long-standing friend of Jo and her parents, struggling in the present with his dream of becoming an inventor. 'Kids' stuff,' he dismisses it, in an echo of Emily's abandoned, youthful wish to be a writer.)

Perhaps, too, the reality of adolescence in 1960s Sydney dampened her ambition. Could these feelings have found their way into the character of Britta, the heroine of the Star of Deltora quartet, many years later? As she explained in a *Books + Publishing* supplement …

> I was interested in the idea of a young woman struggling to follow her dream in a time after war; when many of the older generation (Britta's mother, for example) naturally want to return as quickly as possible to a peaceful, ordered life governed by all the old pre-war rules. In a way, the children born in Australia after World War II (like me) sometimes found themselves arguing with our parents who, however dearly loved, seemed to want us to live the way they had when they were young. In my mother's young life, for example, the daughters of middle-class parents often stayed at home and didn't have jobs. In her world, few women went to university. But I wanted to go to university and to have a career so I had to argue to get what I wanted. In thinking about Britta, and the story I was weaving around her, I also became interested in the idea of a young person whose dreams had been shattered by a scandal that was not her fault. This made fulfilling her dream so much harder – so she had to be stronger and more determined than most.[2]

There had been another obstacle to becoming a writer. On more than one occasion – such as on Insight Profile's 1999 video – Emily has explained how, as a child, she had found the advice 'Write about what you know' and 'Use your imagination' extremely unhelpful. Nothing in her life was exciting enough to write about. It inhibited her for years. But in the process of telling Kate the story that became *Something Special*, she realised she had '[discovered] a sort of spell that turned dull, ordinary things into excitement, adventure, fantasy – and stories. A very simple spell. Just two words. "What if?"'[3]

When Emily was telling Kate the story, she was wearing a favourite dress, something she often put on when she came home from work. It was so familiar that the children named it 'Spotty' and often pictured their mother wearing it when they thought of her in those days. Emily remembered her own mother having a favourite red dress that she wore to parties when Emily was very young. Surely other people had favourite items of clothing too. And what if favourite clothes took on the personalities of the people who owned them? And so the story evolved.

In 2020, in the lockdowns during the Coronavirus pandemic, Emily did a number of online sessions to keep in touch with her readers. She participated in the bookshop chain Dymocks' 'Chapter One' livestream event, which had fans messaging from as far away as Texas. She gave an example of how a story can be created from the smallest detail. Not one of her own stories, she pointed out, but her sons'. When Alex and Clem were three, she was walking them home from kindergarten. I'll paraphrase the news the twins imparted to their mother.

Alex: Tom's granny fell in the freezer at the supermarket.

Emily: Oh! That's terrible.

Emily knew Tom's granny from pre-school drop-off to be a frail old lady. She also knew that the supermarket freezer was a deep chest, not a stand-up cabinet like we

have today. And she could just imagine this poor old lady falling into the freezer.

Clem: Yeah! And she got stuck in the ice!

Emily: Oh … right …

Alex: Then the supermarket man came and got her out – with an axe.

Clem: And he chopped her all to bits.

Then, Emily recalled, 'very satisfied with their story, they went inside and had afternoon tea.' But she kept thinking. And she realised that here was the perfect example of how a story develops in the teller's mind.

They probably heard Tom's granny say, 'You know it was so funny, I almost fell in the freezer in the supermarket today.' Then they thought, 'What if she had?' It would have been easy to picture this older lady head down in the freezer, legs kicking in the air. Pleased with that image, they started to use their logic to develop the scenario. Despite being only three, they used their experience – they'd seen bags of frozen peas get caught in ice. They knew, too, that the supermarket manager wouldn't want an old lady stuck in his freezer. She'd have to be got out.

'Now, here is where personality comes in,' Emily said and explained that if she were to attempt to free Granny, she'd use a gentle method, like slowly melting the ice with a hair dryer. To rough-and-tumble three-year-olds, that would have been too tame. So why not use an axe? Despite knowing full well that sharp objects can cause injuries. 'So they have a perfect ending to their tale.'

Even now, every story – however long or short or for whichever audience – evolves in that way, taking an image or situation that appeals to the writer and pushing it further by asking, 'What if?'

For her high school education, Emily attended Abbotsleigh, the prestigious Anglican girls' school in nearby Wahroonga. In the autobiographical essay in Omnibus Books' *The 2nd Authors and Illustrators Scrapbook* she included a photo from those school days when she made friends she is still friends with now. Emily told me …

> I had a very good time there. Our head teacher, Miss Archdale, was the most wonderful woman. She came out here originally as the captain of the women's cricket team. She was also head of the Women's College at Sydney University. She was at Abbotsleigh for over 10 years. She was a big, plain, straightforward woman who wore cardigans. She was like the antithesis of the North Shore matrons, like the other mothers and the school board.

Betty Archdale (1907–2000) was headmistress of Abbotsleigh from 1958–70. The legacy of the Suffragette movement, among whom she grew up, instilled a conviction to champion further rights and opportunities for women beyond gaining the right to vote. Before arriving in Australia in 1946, she had studied law in London and the former Soviet Union and served in the WRNS in Singapore as a wireless operator in the Second World War. At Abbotsleigh, she reformed the history curriculum (focusing more on Australian history than British), the uniform policy (scrapping the wearing of hats and gloves) and introduced sex education. She was an inaugural member of the Australia Council for the Arts.

Two main trainlines in Sydney led to Abbotsleigh: the North Shore line which conveyed Emily from Killara; and the mainline from Beecroft and Cheltenham which is how Emily's friend, politician and writer Meredith Burgmann, travelled to the school. Meredith has described Beecroft as 'the second-most boring place in Australia' and Cheltenham, where she moved at age seven, as the most boring.[4] Emily told me that while Killara 'was a lovely place to bring up children' it became 'quite boring, when I was a teenager.'

Meredith joined Abbotsleigh in 1961, twelve months after the first-year friendships had bedded in – thereby avoiding all the first-year fights – and found herself amongst the 'intellectuals', as she called them, roughly a group of six which included Emily.

Meredith was an outsider in that she was proficient at sports (which gave her currency in the eyes of Miss

Archdale or 'Archie', as she refers to her) – and a rugby league supporter as opposed to a rugby union fan, like Emily. Whether as a participant, or joining the crowd of girls who watched the boys' school matches on Saturdays, Emily tended to slide in and out of the sporting factions.

With Jim Oswin working in television, Emily had a richly textured home life to balance the well-mannered bearing of the great-aunts. She recalls …

> Our house was continually filled with television actors and producers and directors. I just thought of it as normal at the time but there was a lot of controversy in those very early days of television – a lot of people didn't approve of TV at all, and thought it was going to rot everyone's brains. So I had a bit of flak at school about that kind of thing. At the same time I couldn't help noticing – a bit like *The Australian Women's Weekly* – that people affected to despise it but somehow everyone knew what had been on the night before![6]

One programme that was a very big deal in the Oswin household in the mid-1960s, when Emily was in her teens, was the incredibly popular *The Mavis Bramston Show*, which has been described as 'the mother of Australian comedy'. It was ground-breaking in the way it brought political and social satire to commercial TV. It was the brainchild of British actress-turned-producer Carol Raye, who'd recently arrived in Australia and who pitched the idea to Jim Oswin. Thanks to him, Raye became the first female television executive in Australia. Raye's co-stars,

including Gordon Chater, Noeline Brown and Barry Creyton all became household names.

> Dad used to have to go every Tuesday night to watch *The Mavis Bramston Show* being made, even though he was General Manager and these days would have had nothing to do with it. But because it was regarded as rather vulgar, and they got into trouble when things went against the conventional norms, he was responsible for it, so he could stop anything that was too outrageous. But it was really great for us because it meant my brothers and I got to know a lot of terrific actors. Gordon Chater was a great family friend. We really benefited from it, I think. It was a very fascinating childhood.

This helped nurture her belief that the commercial is just as valid as the literary. However, despite her exposure to TV, Emily considered books to be about 'fine literature', such as weighty classics from the previous century, like *David Copperfield* or *Moby Dick*. That changed when she went to work in publishing. Her fixation with highbrow literary works 'just wore off. I started finding … it was enormously stimulating to produce something that people wanted to buy, whether it be commercial or whether it be literature. I found I was able to enjoy the whole act of selling to somebody.'[7]

As she said to me in our interview, 'Just because a thing is popular doesn't mean it's bad. I think a great thing is to be popular but also to bring to it the best

quality writing you can possibly do.' Sometimes, this combination puzzles and surprises people. 'When Rondo came out, some people were surprised I could write like that because it was so much better, they said, than Deltora Quest. But I didn't feel that. I worked harder on Deltora Quest – it was like polishing a gem; it was so hard to get it right. I wanted it to be accessible to those people who didn't normally pick up a book.'

But this dichotomy clearly ate away at her confidence for many years until she realised, 'What does it matter if I'm not Patrick White or Dickens? I can tell a good tale.' And yet, Emily never succumbed to hubris. Even as she accepted her *sixth* Book of the Year Award in 2019, and thanked her family and colleagues, she acknowledged, 'Thirty-five years on, I'm not very much more sure of myself than I was when *Something Special* was published.' She acknowledged the judges of the award, too – 'for encouraging me to think that, whatever my doubts, I can go on being a writer– or at least that it won't be silly for me to try.[8]

Abbotsleigh's 'bright' girls were expected to attend Sydney University. While other students undertook overly ambitious maths electives and physics and chemistry – sometimes resulting in failure – practical Emily took Maths III, and focused her energies on the subjects she did well in and would gain her the results she needed to further her education.

'None of us became obsessive about the school,' Meredith Burgmann explained. 'It was just a stage you

went through – perhaps inspired by Miss Archer's edict that, "This is not a ladies' college, it's a girls' school" – education was the goal not becoming a North Shore matron.' The girls' true allegiance was to Sydney University.

There, Emily joined the literary crowd while Meredith became immersed in drama and joined SUDS. But she remembered Emily being a good actor. Together with some of the other girls, they remained friends through uni and beyond. Alex and Clem attended the same primary school as Meredith's son Paddy in Sydney and, long after, until Covid, the erstwhile friends would regularly visit Emily in the Blue Mountains.

I was fortunate enough to talk to Meredith about her early years with Emily over video from London to Sydney. One particularly telling observation she made was that the future author matured earlier than the other girls. What's more, 'She always knew stuff and we wondered where it came from.' Perhaps this came from TV which wasn't so prevalent in other girls' homes.

I suspect Emily would suggest that *she* learned a lot from her friends. Meredith's comments reminded me of remarks Emily made to Sarah McDuling and Shanu Prasad for Booktopia TV's podcast in 2021 to launch her stand-alone novel *Eliza Vanda's Button Box*. Emily was referring to the child at the heart of the story, Milly Dynes, when she remarked that, 'Sometimes people think just because you live an ordinary life … you don't

know anything. But in fact, you know an awful lot. Kids especially think they don't know anything. I used to think that.'[5]

In the story, Milly Dynes lives in a beachside town with her dad who rents out holiday cabins. Her calm, controlled life is in a state of upheaval and she isn't sure she likes it. Then along comes Eliza Vanda, an itinerant dressmaker, seeking accommodation in the low season, who soon enlists Milly to run various messages for her. 'She's actually terribly well known as a problem solver, as well as a dressmaker,' Emily explained. When Milly takes her place in certain situations, she is drawn into people's problems and uses her human experience and 'nous' to solve elaborate, fantastic problems – and her own.

3

The Publisher

Emily graduated from Sydney University with a BA Honours degree in 1969 – that was also the year she married her first husband, fellow arts student, Norm Rowe, at the age of 21. She had thought of becoming a journalist, but her father discouraged this idea. Journalism was considered a tough field for women then, outside of writing the gossip columns.

So she got a job instead at Paul Hamlyn Pty Ltd – publishing being considered 'more ladylike', perhaps, or a 'soft option', which Emily soon realised wasn't the case at all. She worked as an assistant editor for a couple of years while Norm Rowe worked on TV's *This Day Tonight*.

Then she quit to return to 'fine literature' … and student life. She smiled ruefully as she recalled …

> It was a terrible thing to do, really; in terms of career [progression] it was ridiculous. But I just sort of missed the academic life. So I gaily left. I went home and did the MA on Emily Dickinson which I very much enjoyed. But all the time I was freelancing. Eventually we amassed enough money to do the trip to England that every one of my generation had to do. I came back after a year and got the job at Angus & Robertson.

Angus & Robertson – where Norm Rowe also worked for a few years – was Australia's oldest indigenous publishing company, releasing its first title specifically for children in 1897. *Teens* was written by Louise Mack who had been a schoolfriend of Ethel Turner, author of *Seven Little Australians*. Almost a decade later, founding publisher George Robertson issued an Australian edition of *Dot and the Kangaroo* by Ethel Pedley, who had spent some time in Australia but had since returned to her native England. The authors and books that became household names quickly joined the list. Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* (1918), C.J. Dennis's *A Book for Kids* (1921) and Dorothy Wall's *Blinky Bill* (1933).

Having such prolific and successful writers meant A&R didn't need to cast their net wide to find new talent (post-war paper shortages inhibited experimentation, in any case). But by the 1950s, new writers had been acquired – notably Joan Phipson, Patricia Wrightson and Ivan Southall (already established on the adult list). These books were regularly recognised in the CBCA Book of the Year Awards.[1]

Angus & Robertson was the first Australian publisher to appoint an editor with specific responsibility for the children's list. Joyce Saxby had been in post for just a year when she died, of cancer, in 1964 but her enthusiasm and energy set the bar high for her successor. Barbara Ker Wilson came from England with an enviable reputation; as editor at Collins, she discovered Michael Bond's *A Bear Called Paddington*. In her decade at A&R, Ker Wilson made her mark, publishing several CBCA award winners and nurturing new talent. After she moved to Hodder

& Stoughton, David Harris became responsible for the children's list. Harris had come to publishing from a background in education, teaching at primary, secondary and tertiary level. He joined A&R in 1973 – the year Emily started there – and stayed till 1980.

Her first job was in the education division, 'although I knew nothing about education. I had basic editorial skills, I suppose. Then the education division was sold off and Richard Walsh asked me to stay and work in the General and Children's area. I was the only other editor at that time.'

The early 70s wasn't an easy time for A&R.[2] 'There was a bit of a rumpus,' Emily said. The company was in dire straits: the list was sprawling and newer publishers, agile and focused, were stealing ground from the behemoth. British publishers had invested in Australian local publishing too. A&R's systems were old and costly to maintain. Several attempts had been made to buy the firm and the Robertson family finally ceded control in 1972, to the consternation of much of the senior staff. Richard Walsh's employment, as managing director and publisher, was not universally welcomed and his radical strategy was essential but divisive. The company lost a number of previously loyal authors.

Emily freelanced during Kate's toddler years. 'In those days there was no maternity leave,' she said. 'I just had to take whatever leave I had. Richard let me add sick pay to holidays.'

In 1977, David Harris was appointed MD of A&R's UK branch, at which point Emily assumed responsibility for the children's division – taking time out for Hal's birth in 1981.

In the late 70s, Emily explained, 'the list was shrinking all the time because David was in England and with the best will in the world he wasn't commissioning much here and we didn't have much profile.' The lack of new talent on the list was not going unnoticed by her colleagues, as she told interviewer Sally Harper, 'They used to tease me about it and say, "Oh, one day, you'll have a Book of the Year Award," and of course, it was something that I would have liked to have.'[3]

Emily told me, 'Most of our effective publishing had been in the area of republication, bringing out new Pixie O'Harrises or repackaging fairy tales.' But however fond a publisher is of their classics, 'it's humanly impossible to ignore the new things going on around you'. Discovering 'new treasures' is the holy grail that every editor longs for, although you very rarely admit to such hubris. 'Sometimes people ask me who was my greatest discovery,' Emily told Harper, 'and I always feel most embarrassed by that question. In my view if someone is that good, they were there all the time and I just happened to be the lucky publisher who opened the envelope first.'

(Yes, there's truth in that. But you need a hunger to commission, which has a toehold in ego.)

Literary success didn't elude A&R under Emily's management. The mid to late 1970s saw the emergence of a new wave of Australian children's writers with a more political attitude than their predecessors. These 'Baby Boomer' writers became the leading voices of the 80s. The youngest and earliest published was Simon French, whose debut novel, *Hey Phantom Singlet*, was written while he

was a teenage schoolboy in Sydney's western suburbs, and accepted by David Harris. French remembers that fellow A&R writer Ivan Southall's later period work 'particularly resonated with me as a younger teenager – *Josh* [also published by A&R] springs to mind.'[4] *Hey Phantom Singlet* earned a special mention in the CBCA awards in 1976.

Simon French remembers working on the final d raft of *Cannily Cannily*, his second novel, in his first y ear o f teaching, while living in the Hunter Valley. He submitted it to A&R, not realising Harris had left, and learned that his new editor would be Emily. They met at the North Ryde office early in 1981. Simon told me …

> She had a friendly and keen demeanour and I immediately felt at ease. She had already looked through my draft and was keen to set up some further face-to-face meetings with me to get the manuscript up to scratch. It was clear to me that she had a very informed eye for kids' lit and I felt very comfortable and confident that my work was in good hands. I remember thinking at the time that she genuinely liked my writing, and so felt a lot more confident about my capabilities. [She] had a very good handle on the way I'd set out the characters and plot, suggesting a few tweaks here and there to have things sit more tightly and effectively.

Emily's guidance also included the mantra of 'Show, don't tell' when it comes to action in a story, and perhaps, most memorably, her advice: *Your book is going to be*

read aloud by teachers, librarians and perhaps parents, so it has to sound as good out loud as you think it sounds in your head. 'So over a couple of editor/author meetings, we took turns reading the chapters aloud to each other. It made me super-aware of continuity glitches, repetitive vocabulary and sentence structuring, and I've used it ever since.'

Cannily, Cannily was Highly Commended for the Book of the Year Award in 1982 and Simon's third novel, *All We Know*, was crowned Book of the Year in 1987. It's interesting to note that he wasn't aware that Emily was an author herself until the end of their working relationship – in the final stages of working on *All We Know* she 'revealed she also had a text in the throes of being edited and published'.

In September 1984, Emily addressed the Children's Book Council's Canberra seminar on Writing and Illustrating for Children. It was a star-studded event which featured keynotes from some of Australia's leading practitioners: illustrators Craig Smith and Julie Vivas, and authors Robin Klein and Eleanor Spence. Emily titled her CBCA talk 'How does the Garden Grow: the Management of an Established Children's List'. By then, she was responsible for the general and children's lists at A&R but the main focus of her commissioning was children's. She apologised for the 'whimsy' of the title but the metaphor usefully encompassed the various components of the list and her job.

> A garden, like a publisher's list, if the publisher is as lucky as we are, can contain all sorts of different kinds

> of plants, but its backbone and its glory would usually be those big old trees and shrubs that were there when the garden first began: those big ornaments that give the whole place its character and depth, the things that stay on through dry seasons, through neglect … Other things come and go; people come in and titivate and mess around but they are always there. Except for catastrophe they remain.[5]

They are 'good, strong stock' she attested. They are so established 'they have become part of the landscape' and their deep roots 'have some part in binding the whole place together': 'They are important national symbols.' A third reason: 'they are a joy to have around and so people have looked after them and cherished them.'

But Emily knew that such books eventually go out of copyright, seventy years after the author's death, and then anyone can publish them. And there's a sense of the classics not really being yours in the first place. They belong to a different time which can inspire admiration and respect but despair as well.

She spoke of backlist as a joy but also a 'bane' – partly because some people thought she only dealt with old books but also because very few people realise how much work is involved in maintaining a backlist. Keeping it relevant and fresh – 'we do not publish things for curiosity value; we publish them to be read generally' – was crucial. That often entailed confronting deplorable attitudes of the past and deciding to make changes or offer warnings to prospective readers. Emily was aware of the need to make all books

truly representative of their contemporary audience.

> Just take the most obvious things, like books that feature girls as well as boys … books that are free of racism and class-conscious attitudes. Or books that simply reflect the world that children recognise as their own – a world where people talk the way we talk, where kids have a freedom of dress and movement that was unknown in past times, where they are not so well mannered, where there is television and aeroplanes.

In the 2020s, there's more than TV and planes to consider, but the need for every child to see themselves in the pages of books is still urgent and any progress made has been eroded with more needing to be done than ever. (Emily noted it was often easier to propose changes to authors direct because they were 'interested in making a living' but it was difficult to deal with estates who wanted the original words and views preserved in aspic.)

Emily also mentioned a kind of 'artificial' backlist, which comes from achieving success and a reputation for a certain kind of publishing, such as repackaging classics. Other publishers may not have the skills or resources to make these titles thrive so the rights lapse and are snapped up by a publisher people look to for exactly that kind of publishing. Angus & Robertson was happy to oblige.

In publishing, it can be frowned upon to 'poach' authors who have built up loyalties with other editors. But wise editors look for opportunities that won't encroach. 'Robin Klein was very popular but she was tied up with

other publishers,' Emily told me. 'I noticed there was a serial in the *School Magazine*, called *The Enemies*.' It had already been illustrated by the ever-popular Noela Young. 'So I said to Tim Curnow her agent, "How about we put this together and make a book?" And so we did.'

Evenings and weekends, like every book editor, Emily would dive into the deluge of speculative submissions from would-be authors, referred to in publishing as the 'slush pile', a now mythologised portal because most publishers no longer accept approaches from unagented authors unless they belong to a specific demographic and offer a specific kind of project.[6]

In 1979, at the age of 16, Cassandra Golds met Emily, when she submitted a novel called *The Swagman*, written during the long summer holiday. Cassandra's story of what happened next is both compelling and inspirational:

> In due course [Emily] wrote me a very encouraging letter that was part a detailed critique, and a kind of plan for rewriting it. I was still just a teenager and I was thrilled, as you can imagine, that my manuscript had been engaged with so seriously. So I devoted the next Christmas holiday (all six weeks of it) to a new draft, which I wrote, or rewrote, following Emily's advice, and then, in early 1980, I sent it back to her. That, if I remember correctly, was when I first met her. To my surprise and awe, she asked me to lunch, and we went to a restaurant somewhere near the offices of Angus & Robertson at North Ryde.

> Either at that lunch, or in a subsequent letter, I can't remember, she explained to me, in a very judicious and completely un-condescending way, what was still wrong with the manuscript and why it was not yet to publishable standard, and advised me to put it aside and work on something else. I remember her saying that part of the problem was me choosing to write about things that were very far from my experience (there was a section set in Nazi Germany). In those days my writing was soggy with emotion – I poured all my teenage feelings into it (my books are still full of emotion but I hope I've worked out how to get away with it).

Cassandra wrote two more 'practice' manuscripts and then, in the eight-week Christmas holiday between her first and second years at university, wrote *Michael and the Secret War*, which Emily accepted in late 1982. Cassandra remembers learning a great deal from the editing process, some of which took place in the A&R office (where Cassandra met Richard Walsh, then Publisher, 'who I was terribly impressed by, as I already knew the story of the UK Oz trial.') All the editorial suggestions were presented as suggestions, and tended to involve removing over-written passages. 'It was a very good way of learning a leaner, terser style. In fact the experience of being edited by Emily made me into an adult writer.'

More than just an editor, Cassandra considers Emily to have been a mentor who was 'positively sublime, and a perfect match for a young woman of my particular make-up.

I tremendously admired her intellectual prowess – in those days Angus & Robertson was like an extension of the English Department of Sydney University, which I revered, and she was like the nicest ever lecturer or tutor – so well read, so enlightened and broad minded. I also very much appreciated her 'catholic' taste – she had a deeply intelligent ability to appreciate stories for what they were – rather than taking the approach that what was needed was a different kind of story. So the purpose of her editing was to help the author to say what she was already trying to say, rather than to correct what she was saying and encourage her to say something else.

She wasn't narrow or judgemental about literature in the way that is common now – she was able to enter with sympathy the works of an author like Dickens, or on the other hand a modern author whose aesthetic and attitudes were entirely the opposite. So she was able to enjoy my rather traditional kind of fantasy story at the same time as embracing the more avant-garde range of the spectrum in her other authors. I remember asking her with great trepidation whether I could use a quote from the Bible at the beginning of the book (I was terribly aware that I had stumbled into a milieu which didn't have a great deal of patience for Christianity). To my surprise and delight, she was enthusiastic, and encouraged me not only to quote from the Bible, but to use the King James Version because of its beauty and authority. Emily could really enter into the spirit of things.

> I think that intellectual approach is quite rare and that the general tone of the intelligentsia now is far more doctrinaire. But she embodied, for me, my idea of what an intelligent person should be, and everyone afterwards has had to live up to her!

Simon French also described Emily as both an editor and mentor who set the bar high for future author-publisher relationships. 'Quality editorship is vital to a writer's growth,' he told me. 'Challenging and engaged conversations are vital to empowering and furthering the skills and voice of any writer.'

Around the same time as Cassandra was completing *Michael and the Secret War*, Emily was 'sitting [at home], on a Sunday afternoon, reading the slush pile, as you do. I read this book, thinking, My God – this is so good. I rang the author up which is a terribly over-enthusiastic thing to do – it was Libby Gleeson. She was so pleased and I was so pleased I'd found this lovely book.'

Eleanor, Elizabeth was published by A&R in 1984 and was Highly Commended for the CBCA Awards. It's fun to note that Emily attended the awards ceremony as Libby Gleeson's proud publisher but left with her own medal for *Something Special.*

Jenny Pausacker had already published stories in the Reading Rigby scheme for schools when she was awarded a Literature Board grant in 1982 to work on *What Are Ya?,* the first Australian novel for younger readers with a queer main character. Kay Ronai, of Penguin Books, asked to see the completed manuscript.

Jenny explained to me what happened next:

> After reading it, she told me, with game-changing honesty, that she wished things were different but at present a book like mine would have to be twice as good as the next book, so I set about making it twice as good. Rewriting turned out to be even harder than writing, so I gave myself the deadline of finishing in time to submit it for the 1985 Angus & Robertson Junior Writers Fellowship.

Jenny admits she considered the deadline to be a 'fantasy' one, with no real expectation of winning – so she was surprised when Emily phoned to tell her that she'd won. In that conversation,' Jenny said that Emily …

> went from talking about my book's literary merit to telling me that she was particularly pleased to be publishing it, because a schoolfriend of hers had killed herself as a result of the pressures involved in coming out as a lesbian and she felt that, if books like *What Are Ya?* had been around at the time, her friend might still be alive.

Like Simon French and Cassandra Golds, Jenny Pausacker asserts that Emily 'was one of the best editors I've ever had, scrutinising every detail of the manuscript while at the same time respecting my rights as the author'.

*

Let's return to Emily's description of her literary garden. Emily spoke to the CBCA audience of the plantings that are annuals; they are rarely missed when they die because they can be replaced. Other plants are disappointments because they're expected to thrive and don't. Fashions change – 'from say pastels into bright colours' – and some plantings must be weeded out. But new ones can endure, becoming as established as their antecedents: 'They take their place and become old favourites too.'

Forty years on from its first publication, and still very much in print, *Something Special* qualifies as a favourite. With her publisher's hat on (because, of course, nobody yet knew she was its author), Emily described it to the CBCA audience as a 'conventional kind of book' with 'one interesting problem attached to it …

> It was a 10,000-word manuscript aimed at children obviously aged eight to ten. We have had a bit of a hassle trying to work out exactly how to package books for that age group: how many pictures to use, whether to make the book look like a picture book or whether to make it look like a 'book' book. I talked to quite a lot of people about this. Eventually I talked to what seemed like a hundred children of that age in Children's Book Week. I asked them what they would like the best.
>
> All of them said the same thing: a book-shaped book, so that it would not feel babyish; a lot of illustrations, but not coloured ones because that is a bit babyish; large enough type and a lot of white space on the

> page (meaning, I suppose, that they would like larger margins). In other words, they were describing a cross between a picture book and the kind of novel that has six illustrations throughout. So with this book we did something which we have not done before. We contracted the author as if it were a picture book even though it was going to look like a short novel. But this way we could afford to commission an artist to illustrate every double-page spread if necessary. In fact, we did not want it to look too 'pictury', because that would be too babyish, but there is at least one full page illustration on every second double-page spread. The children that I tested this on (because I have more manuscripts of this length coming up and I am very keen to know if it is going to work) love that.

She said she was 'watching this one very carefully, because I hope it will be the forerunner of a lot of others that we will be able to do in this same series'. Several titles followed, but both *Pigs Might Fly* and *The Best-Kept Secret* were longer stories that suited the more conventional portrait format. It's worth noting, however, that at that time, Australian children's publishers were being innovative with short, illustrated text for readers who had moved beyond picture books but perhaps lacked the stamina for 40,000-word novels. The introduction of the Junior Book of the Year category in the CBCA awards in 1982 offered encouragement to all to experiment with how stories were acquired, contracted and ultimately packaged – with the promise of a guaranteed boost in sales if shortlisted.

Emily was frank about the frustrating economics at play in publishing – the fact that children's books have a much lower recommended retail price than adult titles, so more copies need to be sold in order to be profitable. This had – and continues to have – an effect on profile which you could tell really mattered to her. 'I want my company to see the children's books as a very valuable asset and for them to feel that the children's list is an intrinsic part of the company's profitability. That way, they will let me do more and more.' She was delighted by the success of Duncan Ball, who (she told Sally Harper) 'was [an author] who showed reps and booksellers that we could package up and sell a very successful commercial children's book.' Duncan Ball's books for A&R include the bestselling Selby books about a talking dog (which began life as a column in *Family Circle* magazine), illustrated by popular cartoonist Allan Stomann, the 'Ghost and the …' series, illustrated by Noela Young and, more recently, the Emily Eyefinger books illustrated by Craig Smith.

A particular frustration was the resistance to paperback publishing – from some in a generation of reviewers, teachers and librarians who felt only a hard-wearing hardback edition signified a book's long-term value. Emily restated her defence in the *Orana* interview:

> I've got children of my own and I was in strong contact with children, and I know the way they work and I know they don't go to look at hardback shelves. So from their point of view, if a book isn't in paperback it doesn't exist. Even though having *Anne of Green Gables* in

> hardback might have generated money for the company in certain areas, I thought the time was going to come when children were going to forget it was there at all. So we paperbacked those and it was an enormous success.[7]

In the 1980s, A&R's children's team was expanding. Emily appointed Margaret Wild, whose first picture book, *There's a Sea in My Bedroom*, illustrated by Jane Tanner, had appeared in 1985. 'Before then,' Margaret said, 'I'd worked on educational books at Methuen, as well as on very dry tax and legal tomes at a legal publisher, so working on a varied children's list was an absolute pleasure.'

Margaret edited *The Best-Kept Secret*. 'Then,' as Emily explained, 'she told me she was leaving to go to Omnibus Books.

> We were all a bit unsettled because Richard had left and we'd been sold by Bay Books. That was even before HarperCollins [took over]. It all got a bit difficult. I was starting to think, 'I'm not sure if this is going to work for me.' Margie also saw the writing on the wall. So I went with her, as part of her dowry.

Simon French was another loyal author who felt unsettled by the changes at A&R which 'had really felt like "home" for me'. He badly missed Emily who had been 'such a compatible creative spirit'. David Harris had already moved to Ashton Scholastic, and invited Simon to bring his third novel, *Change the Locks*, to the list,

which Simon duly did. The book – 'a text I dearly believed in, based very directly on my years working in the child welfare system' – was reviewed positively and named an Honour Book in the 1992 CBCA Awards, but Simon says, 'editorially, I didn't feel truly guided, and worried that my writing (and story) wasn't quite where I hoped to be.'

At Omnibus Books, Margaret Wild edited Emily's books *Finders Keepers, The Timekeeper* and *Rowan of Rin.* When she later left to join ABC Books, she edited *Bob the Builder and the Elves*, a short chapter book with black and white pictures by Craig Smith. Emily 'was a dream to edit because her manuscripts were impeccable,' she told me.

> She'd really already edited them herself and didn't require much, if any, feedback. She welcomed criticism, but her one stipulation was that an editor must not suggest how she might solve a particular problem. She needed to resolve any issues herself, which she did with her usual ingenuity. I understood why she felt like this, because I, too, find that suggestions can be paralysing – it's far better to dig deep and solve things yourself.

This is good advice for any editor or writer but seems especially apt when speaking of a fanatical problem solver like Emily.

4

Modern Family

I remembered reading that Emily had suggested – back in her Angus & Robertson days – that 'every publisher's list reflects that publisher's personality'. I've heard this view often before during my years in publishing. 'That's a Rita Hart kind of book,' one might say, referring to the former children's editor at Oxford University Press. Or a 'Rosalind Price book', bringing to mind the founder of Allen & Unwin's children's list.

In turn, I think Emily's day jobs in publishing influenced the stories she devised during her treasured writing sessions. Book publishing is traditionally a slow process, whereas magazines happen quickly (and while books are usually kept, magazines are often quickly discarded). However, moving from Angus & Robertson to *The Australian Women's Weekly* – both significant national institutions – wasn't a quantum leap for Emily, although *The Weekly* gave her 'a whole new slant on things'. Even though, as a working mother, she'd encountered a wide range of professional women, as she made clear to Steve McLeod. 'My kids have been at various kindergartens and child-care centres where I've met a multitude of women who work far, far harder than me,' she said, before proposing that he interview factory

workers and shift workers instead, 'who hold down far more far more than I could probably handle.'[1]

There is a clutch of titles that I think of as Emily's '*Weekly*' books. Particularly during that late 80s–early 90s period, she produced books that engaged head on with the challenges and frustrations of modern family life.

For example, the early chapters of *Finders Keepers* – a book we'll explore further in Chapter 6 – are full of conflicting obligations and desires: Patrick needs new trainers, but he wants to catch the strange new TV show on which he's invited to be a guest; his mother needs to take him shopping, amid all the other weekend obligations, but also wants to turn the experience into quality time for herself and her middle child.

The Weekly's new editor quickly acquired a huge respect for her readers, as she explained …

> because [it] had such a vast readership and because they felt – a little like they felt about the ABC, I think – so proprietorial about it, they felt we were their friends, they knew us, so they wrote to us about all sorts of things and you actually got to know about a very wide range of people in a way that book publishing could not supply.[2]

But she was careful not to overstep the boundaries. 'The readers don't need me to change their minds,' she

reported. 'You might be able to present information so that things seem a little clearer but they don't need me to tell them what their ideas should be, and if they disagree, nothing we say will change their mind.'[3]

One change she did make successfully was to offer more Australian writers the opportunity to publish fiction in the magazine. 'Not that it's something that actually sells magazines, or that anyone in management here would probably notice … but I knew people whose style was perfectly suited to writing commercial fiction. I think there are people who didn't read our stories before who are now. They're a lot more varied now, not just your secretary-meets-boss and wedding bells numbers.'[4] One of the authors to benefit from this new policy was Sophie Masson, who is the author of more than 70 books for readers of all ages. She had two speculative fiction stories accepted and published in *The Weekly*. Sophie told me Emily 'was instrumental in helping me build up my career. Having my work exposed to such a big readership was such a thrill! I have never forgotten it.'

Emily has talked about the magazine's mailbag. She read all but the most routine letters – and the readers' stories – herself, and was happy to rely on first reader, Berry, who would draft answers for her to sign. 'Mostly her answers were perfect,' she told me. 'Just what I would have said myself.'

The readers' letters were often intimate and incredibly sad. 'I barely went through a day without being in tears,' she once said.

> They made me so aware of the things a lot of people live with, every day. I sometimes think of it now, walking round the supermarket. A lady might have a schizophrenic son who prowls around the house at night frightening them all. She might be beaten by her husband. It made me want to do articles that would help those people, would tell them where to go. Before I think I'd been in a bit of a bubble and thought people knew what to do [in those situations]. But sometimes people don't and feel in such despair. These days it's a bit different because there's a lot of information about but there wasn't then.[5]

The *Weekly*'s mailbag contained plenty of funny stories, too, and moments halfway between comedy and despair. Legend has it that one Friday evening a reader phoned in to say her daughter was getting married the next day and had waxed her legs for the first time … and they'd stuck together. Who at *The Weekly* could help? Of course, someone did – and presumably the wedding proceeded without any further hitches.

This story – along with others quoted in this book – strikes me as being deliciously emblematic of Emily's no-nonsense, unflinching view of life that sits with astonishing ease and comfort alongside perilous high fantasy scenarios. A chief hallmark of Emily's books, I believe, is her celebration of the messiness of family life.

There's just one other Australian author I can think of who depicted such messiness without irritation or

resentment. Although New Zealand born, Ruth Park (1917–2010) spent much of her adult life living in Sydney, like Emily. She, too, wrote for all ages, and, again like Emily, captures this with such piquancy and affection (far more than indignation or rage). *Callie's Castle* was published by A&R in 1974 (just after Emily joined) and its sequel, *Callie's Family*, came out in 1988 (after she'd left). Identifiably set in Sydney, they are about Callie who deals with three younger siblings and, more unusually, a (Danish) stepfather. *Playing Beatie Bow* (Nelson, 1980, and winner of the CBCA Book of the Year Award in 1981) is a timeslip which takes Abigail from modern day city life into the Rocks of the nineteenth century – the trigger being her parents' marital break-up and the threat of being uprooted to another country.

Conflict and compromise abound in Emily's collection of spiky urban fantasies for adults, published under her real name as *Fairy Tales for Grown-Ups*. (It was first published as *Angela's Mandrake and Other Feisty Fables* in 2000.) I like to think Emily had her *Weekly* readers in mind when she wrote these stories, offering them an antidote perhaps to the blustery fantasy world of the royal family or Hollywood celebrity which billowed each month from the magazine's pages.

This pocket-size volume comprises seven cautionary tales. All very tongue-in-cheek, they begin timelessly enough with 'One day …' or 'Once upon a time' but quickly return to the reality of turn-of-the-century Australian life, especially the lives of women disadvantaged by the

selfishness, sexism and stupidity of the men in their lives. 'The Fat Wife' is the story of Rosemary, who has always battled with her weight. A receptionist by trade, she is made to feel unequal to her successful husband Paul, a corporate lawyer, and grateful not only for her spouse's forbearance but her employer's. The couple have separate bank accounts and Rosemary's support of Paul is unreciprocated. One day, Paul decides to leave the marriage, moves into a city apartment and puts the marital home (there have been no children, at his insistence) on the market.

Freed from the bonds of marriage, Rosemary is no happier – nor slimmer – but her good nature endures and she is rewarded for her loyalty to her firm by being given a ticket to the glittering social event that is the Ear-wax Buildup Research Foundation's Friday the 13th Magic Gala Ball at the luxurious Palace-Hilton. Naturally, Paul is also there, and blanks her, but so is Mr Shahim, a loyal client who has taken a shine to Rosemary. He is the star performer and, while Rosemary isn't easily swayed by masculine charms, she feels sorry for him when he asks for a volunteer from the audience and there is no response.

Rosemary knows men too well to be surprised but 'if only she had known ahead of time she could have warned him that no woman in this cool crowd would ever expose herself by volunteering for anything, let alone for something that invited certain ridicule.' Still, she takes pity on him, answering his call, and proves to be the perfect assistant. She allows the magician to shine and she

positively blooms. In fact, through magic, they transcend their surroundings and enter an exotic world of laughter, wealth, passion, parenthood and passionate sex.

This book is an excellent reminder that Emily can be a very funny writer. In fact, the author note tells us that 'surrounding herself with all that death and turmoil' in her novels for adults 'has left her with the desire to laugh.' Emily laughs a lot in life, too, at herself or scenarios in which she finds herself.

As well as the magazine's readers, Emily had great respect for the expertise of her colleagues. Reflecting on that time, she mused …

> It must have been quite peculiar at the time to have this person who'd come out of book publishing who had never worked in magazines, suddenly in charge of this institution. But actually it worked really well. I loved those women who were fabulous journalists in all their different spheres from beauty to home making to gossip – it was like meeting a really fabulous group of friends who all had specialties of one sort of another. We had a wonderful five years while I was there.[6]

But *surely* she'd agree you can have too much of a good thing? That's the impression we get from Pete in the deliciously funny short novel *Crumbs!*, illustrated by Kerry Argent, Omnibus Books' first illustrator (*One Woolly Wombat*), who became their art director.

Omnibus Books had always published fiction but mostly

for the 9–12 age bracket, achieving success with books by Helen Frances, Garry Hurle and Gillian Rubinstein. In 1990 they launched a 'Young Fiction' range ('Rippers'), with black and white illustrations, and would go on to publish an even younger strand ('Dippers'). The very funny *Crumbs!* was positioned outside this branding and has been reissued several times since as a stand-alone title. The narrator is Pete, who is ten when the events take place but perhaps a year older when he's narrating the tale. He's adjusting to no longer being an only child since the birth of his sister Ellie, now four months old.

Pete's obsession is the Saturday morning TV show about Solvar the Light-Warrior. He watches it while Mum does the shopping and Dad reads the paper. Ellie is there too and is no trouble, so long as he taps the bouncer with his foot. Until, that is, Mum brings home the latest fad for newborns, Brown's Bonzer Baby Biscuits, which Ellie gums down with alacrity … and alarming results. She channels the combative vibes of the TV and issues stern and menacing directives to her brother, in spite of the fact that she's too young to talk. 'You will pay for this!' she intones. 'I will have my revenge!'

Ellie's outbursts become more frequent and public but, naturally, everyone says it's Pete seeking attention now his place has been usurped. Lorraine, neighbour and all-knowing psychologist, confirms the diagnosis of jealousy to Pete's chagrin. Mum keeps buying the biscuits which Pete takes to hiding in his bedroom (attracting colonies of ants …).

Increasingly desperate, Pete writes to Bonzer Biscuits

to complain, but to no avail. In a bid to present a strong, persuasive case to his parents, he draws an analogy between Kraak's power-hungry ambition and baby Ellie's outbursts. But instead of bolstering his position he is diminished. Mum is all sympathy, infantilising him, with her take on the scenario:

> 'Well, my darling, in fact all babies are little Kraaks at heart. They don't know about sharing, or taking turns, or being patient, or thinking about other people's feelings, or any of that. All they know is what they want. And bad luck to anyone who gets in their way. You were exactly the same. And I was, and Dad. All of us. When we were four months old, we all thought we ruled the universe. It's just that most of us grow out of it.'

He is briefly reassured but the problem won't go away. Then he realises other children out there are suffering just as he is – and at last trial by media seems a possibility. Momentum builds towards a very vocal, public, retaliation.

Bungawitta (with illustrations by Craig Smith) came more than a decade after *Crumbs!* but it too pokes fun at our obsession with the media. It's a longer story for a slightly older audience. There's possibly an element of fantasy to it, or maybe it's simply the power of commercial television. Bungawitta is a typical country town 'where the sun always shines' but it's been beleaguered by seven

years of drought. With the exodus of so many people leading to the closure of shops and businesses, the world presented on the TV is the one remaining cultural hub. In fact, the telly is revered – although the well-dressed weatherman is despised because he constantly delivers the same forecast. More sun. No rain.

And yet, like everyone else, young Jay is in thrall to the gogglebox. 'Jay stared at the TV as if it would give him the answer. And suddenly, it did.'

Could tourism reverse the fortunes of Bungawitta? The locals conceive the Bungawitta Earth Sculpture Festival and get all hands on deck to make it a reality. There's some lovely detail about the preparations, such as trying to make crepe paper bunting but having to stop as 'the colour came off on her sweaty fingers'. Goods for sale include Aussie items like choko chutney, Anzac biscuits and coconut ice. But will people come? Fortunately, the locals strike gold in the form of a feature on the hallowed ABC news and the promise that the news team will pay a special visit on the day.

The crowds build and the city slickers immerse themselves in a full country town experience. Their earth sculptures are impressive: 'gleaming wombats, kangaroos, turtles, dinosaurs, maps of Australia, cars, crows, swagmen, unicorns, dolphins, crocodiles, the Sydney Opera House and a giant pineapple' all constructed from the 'dry, brown earth' with the aim of impressing the nation and winning prizes.

The money pours in as the day progresses but the heat gets to everyone. 'The air was heavy with waiting.' *Stone*

the blooming crows, where's the ABC? A rousing piano concert and a round of 'Click Go the Shears' are welcome distractions. But the diversion allows the sly infiltration of the weatherman from a commercial station, off-duty but eager to make his mark. As with ratings, the power lies with the people and he is detained, then offered release only on condition that he promises it will rain. He assures them that it will. And despite the fact that it hasn't rained for seven years, it does. It drenches, it beats down, it soaks, it pounds. All night long.

Was the festival 'one big, risky rain dance' as town elder, Aunty Flo, proposes? Or is it because the commercial stations trump the national broadcaster every time?

Emily tried not to write in the daytime when her children were younger, preferring to devote time to them, but sometimes worked when the twins were asleep as babies. But she admitted to feeling guilty when she took a week's holiday in 1991 just to write. 'It was bliss,' she said; however, 'I felt I was cheating the children out of our time together.'[8]

As Kate and Hal grew older, they started engaging with their mother's writing process and would read chapters straight off the computer. 'If I came out for a cup of tea,' Emily explained to Alf Mappin, 'they'd say, "Go back!" because they wanted to hear what was going to happen next. That helps to keep you going.'[7]

By the time she left *The Weekly*, the children were

older and stayed up later, so Emily took to rising at 4 am to write; a time she relished, because the phone didn't ring and nobody made demands of her. Bob Ryan, too, rose early and they worked side by side at dawn.

Emily has spoken warmly of how her children have inspired her over the years, 'because they help me understand life'[9], although she has stressed that she hasn't based her stories on them directly; not since *Something Special*, where Sam was to some degree based on daughter Kate.

Pigs Might Fly hadn't been inspired by Hal but it was dedicated to him, Emily explained, 'simply because he was always a great traveller. One of his favourite phrases when he was two or three was "One day, can I go into the blue air?" And he has – ' she beamed with pride '– *a lot!*' *Rowan of Rin* wasn't about Alex and Clem, but because 'they were so different – brave in their different ways' it was appropriate to dedicate the novel to them. Emily explained the appeal of Rowan as a character in *Classroom*. 'Everyone has their talent, everyone has something to contribute and you don't have to be a great, tough, outgoing, obviously strong, person to be able to do wonderful things. You can do wonderful things whatever you look like and however strong you are. It's what inside you – it's the strength of character that counts, not the strength of the body. This sounds obvious but it isn't always clear to children when they are younger. Being the same as the group isn't always the best thing to be.'[10]

But the twins' delayed journey towards enjoying books as independent readers – which for Emily is the

holy grail of literacy – inspired a new direction in her writing, into the field of picture book texts. 'When you're sitting there making all the faces and the voices, of course the kids are going to enjoy that,' she said. 'What we want is for them to pick the book up themselves.' But while the twins, aged seven, were avid computer game players, they were not readers at all.

> So I wrote *Power and Glory* with words they could understand and gave the manuscript to them and they literally read it to pieces. So I thought I might offer it, see how we go. I offered it to Omnibus and Sue and Jane sent it back, saying, 'I can't see this at all. Can't see a way of illustrating it.' I sort of put it out of my mind. But then the twins asked for it again and read the second manuscript to pieces so I thought, 'There's something in this. There must be.' Then I sent it to Allen & Unwin, who were the murder mystery publisher, to Ros Price, who also had a seven-year-old boy who didn't read a lot but loved computer games, and she took it on.

Definitely a book for the 1990s gaming generation, *Power and Glory*, illustrated by Geoff Kelly, Emily's first picture book, was published in 1994 (and shortlisted for the CBCA's Picture Book of the Year category the following year, with Geoff Kelly also jointly winning the Crichton Award for New Illustrators). Although a conventional portrait format, structured with the traditional fourteen spreads, the book looked and read like no other at the time.

The design is rigid. The text always appears on the left-hand page, with Geoff Kelly's bold, bright full-page illustrations completely filling the right-hand page. The text page is white with an unadorned sans-serif typeface, although the type appears in different sizes and weights as the story progresses.

So what is the story? The first spread reads:

> For my birthday, I get a video game: POWER AND GLORY. YES!

Just as a child would say it: brief, intense, eager to start. We turn the page …

> I put the game in my machine. And play.
> I walk the path. I climb the wall. I swim the stream. I find the key. I search the cave. I fight the witch … I fight the witch … I fight the witch …

As the cumulative rhythm builds, the pitch rises and the font expands. We turn the page, expecting it to get louder still. But no! Life intervenes. It's Mum, demanding the child comes to breakfast. On the next spread the player resumes and starts again: the path, the wall, the stream, the key, the cave, the witch, another cliff, then the charge of the goblins. But then–

This time, the brothers have interrupted, wanting their turn. But the player regains control and it's time to start again. Each time the child gets further and further into the game before being interrupted so the page of text

becomes longer and fuller and louder. The pictures show the child inside the game, dwarfed by the hyper-realistic depiction of the latest opponent. (Or else there's an image of the interloper.)

Finally, the player makes it to the end –

The ogre comes … The ogre comes …

The page turns …

And I jump him, thump him, thrash him, mush him, crush him, I defeat him, and I win. YES!!!

How to follow such a triumphant result?

Now for Level 2.

This fevered, kinetic storytelling is a far cry from the thoughtful, cerebral early texts, such as *Pigs Might Fly*, where there are pages of explanation of what has happened before Rachel's arrival in the land of the flying pigs. Rachel consults *The Big Book of Knowledge* (subtitle: *All About the World We Live In*) to understand what the Unlikely Events Factor (UEF) is and how it works. The extract occupies most of a chapter – including a bullet-pointed list.

That's not to say Emily doesn't make *Pigs Might Fly*'s

exposition compelling – she makes it plot. And let's not forget that it's an essential component in a crime novel. If you think about the structure of a golden-age mystery, you'll have the first murder, which sets tongues wagging, and then, often when it seems the culprit, motive and opportunity have been decided, there'll be a second murder (perhaps even a third or fourth), which questions all assumptions reached. Then, much of the action in the final chapters entails detailed interviews with people, justifying their attitudes and actions, explaining their back stories, as the detective gradually decants truth from lies.

Other picture book texts were to follow in the late 1990s, perhaps written for non-readers like the twins had been at seven, rather than the traditional core picture book market of three- to six-year-olds who were being read to.

Andrew McLean collaborated with Emily on the *Stories from Squeak Street* picture book and young fiction series, and another picture book, *Where Do You Hide Two Elephants?* which has a rhyming text. I never thought to ask if Emily wrote poetry for its own sake, but I know she turned clues from prose to rhyme in the Rowan books, and rhymes featured in all her subsequent high fantasies.[11] This is the story of a young boy's – was the protagonist destined to be a boy? – efforts to hide two elephants, Lean-and-Mean and Sad-and-Sorry, from their 'nasty, and as cruel as cruel can be' owner Major Tooth. So it's a hiding game – an age-old scenario, in a strangely antiquated setting of animal cruelty. The grocer's moustache and the cap-wearing characters are redolent

of times gone by. McLean's artwork nearly always has a tertiary-colour palette, creating a windswept, autumnal feel. But there's no denying the energy of the prose:

> '… Hide us! Please! Or we'll be caught!
> So I said, 'Follow me.'
> I found a clever hiding place.
> But then as you can see …
> 'Hide us! Quick!' the elephants said.
> So I said, 'Follow me.'

A closer match of text and illustration which, like *Power and Glory*, invokes the spirit of play, is *Game Plan,* illustrated by Craig Smith (published by Omnibus Books in 1998). The text employs the same brevity, the staccato series of steps that convey strategy and tactics. This time the setting is an urban backyard game of basketball. The first spread reads:

> We're playing basketball. Max is playing. Jess is playing. Ben is playing. Sal is playing.

Already we see the build-up of strategy and manoeuvres, which is plot. (Brendan is playing too, we learn on the next spread.) The landscape format is divided into frames like a comic strip, relaying the action as it happens. Short lines are arranged left, centred and right, dodging and weaving around the illustrations which can be whole-page scenes or vignettes. This is another book that might have been considered difficult to illustrate

if not interpreted so literally, and it also abandons the traditional need for art that fills a single page or spread.

Plan A unfolds in the first half of the book. The scores are tight. It's getting late. There's all to play for – they need just one point to win. So it's time for Plan B. The language is brisk, to the point. 'It's time to destroy them.' Victory, when it comes, is sweet. But you get the sense the glory is short-lived. It won't be long before it's time to defend their crown. And then it's back to square one.

Emily's earlier picture book collaboration with Craig Smith was *Yay!* (which Omnibus Books had published in 1996). This time, the text is hand-lettered, and the narrative feels looser. This story is a take on the game of Consequences. The family are on their way to Crazy Family Fun World which promises excitement. But the plans are beset with one setback after another, interspersed with episodes of hope.

> Dad won't take me on the Gripper. Oh.
> But Uncle Todd will. Yay!
> Uncle Todd freaks out. Oh.
> But I don't. Yay!

When all's said and done, 'this day has been the best'. I loved this exuberant picture book which is naturally very Australian in feel and detail. The family home is a suburban bungalow; there's a bull-bar on the front of the car; roadside landmarks include a Big Cow, Crayfish and Pineapple and Dad's wearing thongs. Although the

American edition states 'it could be anywhere … Yay!'

Owing to the essential contribution of the illustrator, editor and art director, the picture books were more of a collaborative effort than Emily's previous books. She worked closely with Jane Covernton and Sue Williams, first at Omnibus Books, then at Working Title Press.[12] The first manuscript of *Game Plan* included detailed illustration prompts, which can frustrate an illustrator, making them feel excluded from the creative process, although they were probably useful here in order for others to 'get' Emily's complex ideas, rendered simply in the text. She also had the text checked by children, especially those who were more familiar with the manoeuvres and rules of basketball than the author.

I'd like to point out here, that although you tend you find Emily at her desk (and all the hobbies she's spoken of – cooking, embroidery, reading, of course – are domestic), she is capable of energetic activity when the story calls for it. She told me how when she wrote Deltora Quest, she worked in a room near the front door. Her kids would walk past the window on their way inside, and see her hunched and contorted, one arm wrapped around her neck, the other bearing her weight against the wall, perhaps, as she located the words to describe a scene in vivid detail.

The Long Way Home, illustrated by Danny Snell, was published by Working Title Press in 2001, and is more suited to the younger end of the market. Emily provided a poetic text about Bright, a sugar glider, who is travelling

home for Christmas but gets swept off course by a wild wind. We learn early in the story that Bright has her own way of expressing ideas, even concepts like 'home' and 'Christmas'; and the contrast between her experiences, the reactions of other Australian animals she encounters, and the landscape which she sees in perhaps a different way to the reader, inspires the suspense, peril and humour of the story. Danny Snell's illustrations in acrylic paint on watercolour paper glow with warmth that ultimately makes this a reassuring bedtime read.

That was the last picture book Emily Rodda wrote, and perhaps we can see this clutch of titles as a diversion from her core body of work, those stories set in immersive, complex worlds which continue to enthral readers everywhere.

5

The Full-Time Writer

By the end of 1992, after five years as editor, Emily felt ready to leave *The Australian Women's Weekly* to become a full-time author. But she was understandably nervous about depending just on her income from writing.

> At the time I was very conscious of the risks involved in leaving my job, mainly because I needed to support my children. However, by that time I had already written books for both adults and children and they had done fairly well. What really made it possible was that those books were selling overseas. That brings in more income than you can really earn in Australia unless your book is a tearaway [success].[1]

Back in 1988, Emily, as publisher, received news from Munich, Germany, that the International Youth Library (IYL) had chosen *Pigs Might Fly* as one of 300 children's books from 40 countries (out of a total of 18,000 submissions) to be named a White Raven title. The criteria for selection was that books were deemed to be of 'outstanding literary, aesthetic and/or cultural value'.[2] A catalogue of the selected books was to be distributed internationally and displayed prominently at the Bologna

Children's Book Fair – which remains *the* world showcase for children's literature, held each March or April.

The books were selling in the USA, too – Greenwillow published *The Best-Kept Secret*, and the *Finders Keepers* duology, while HarperCollins acquired *Pigs Might Fly* (as *The Pigs are Flying*) and Fairy Realm.

In planning her full-time pursuit of writing, Emily thought 'I would have to take other work to make sure I could bring in a stable income. What I hadn't taken into account was that if I was at home all the time I would be able to write more. So I very soon found that I could make a perfectly good living just by my writing and I didn't have to do those other things, which I was very pleased about.'

Emily's first marriage had ended during *The Weekly* years and in time she began her relationship with Bob Ryan, who left his own home in Wiseman's Ferry to live with Emily and her children in inner-city Glebe. Both freelance, the couple worked side by side, as they would go on to do in their Leura house, which Bob – who regularly appeared on TV and radio in the 80s and 90s – built himself, until Emily moved into a writing room of her own. She recalled getting inspiration from those times in an author note for *Bob the Builder and the Elves* …

> My own Bob the Builder was talking building on the phone, while at the other end of our joint study I was playing with a story about fairies. At lunch, Bob's head and conversation was full of bricks and mortar, and mine of wings and wands, and we laughed about

> the contrast and the mutual incomprehension. Like most inner-city mothers, I had combatted everything from cockroaches to mice to head lice in my time, and suffered great inconvenience and embarrassment accordingly. It occurred to me that for a macho bloke, a plague of elves would be just about as bad. I have promised myself the pleasure of writing a story based on this idea for a long time, and at last I've done it.

City life wasn't Bob's natural milieu, and Emily had known the Blue Mountains area since childhood. There was Tom Rodda's shop at Bullaburra and …

> One of my grandfather's brothers had a men's clothing shop at Katoomba. My grandmother came up here for her honeymoon. Then my best friend Ruth moved up here to live with her husband and two children so we used to then come up and visit. Even before that, Steve's aunt had a house in Blackheath with old apple trees in the back … and we'd have a holiday in Kit's house.[3]

Whenever Emily returned to Sydney, she'd think, 'Ah, I wish we could live there. I'd always wanted to.' By 1993 there was nothing to stop them. Kate was about to finish high school, Hal was about to start high school and the twins were about to go into Year 3. 'So that's what we did. The three boys started at their new schools and Kate stayed in Sydney and went to university.'

It seemed to me, I said to Emily, that it was after leaving Sydney that you had all this space – and more

time – to start building these vast worlds with seas and mountains and islands.

'I don't know whether it was the time or the freedom or the space,' she said, 'but a lot of it was because Bob loved what I did.'

This was clearly a breakthrough. In earlier interviews, Emily referred to Norm Rowe's critical response to her work. In 1989, in a *Sunday Mail* profile, Emily spoke of her publishing experience as being useful but complimented her first husband: 'If he likes it I know it must be quite good, if he's half-hearted it could still be passable … He'll pinpoint weaknesses and I'll hate it, but I've always found he's right.'[4] This may have been true of the crime fiction but years later, blessed with Bob's encouragement, Emily revealed that Norm 'had no time for children's books at all and was very disparaging. He thought they were second-rate and found it kind of embarrassing I was writing them.'

Bob's professional experience inspired another 'offbeat' story, this time a text for Omnibus's Solo series. These were high-concept/low-ability readers, set in an accessible sans serif typeface, with illustrations on every page. This hugely successful range attracted texts from many of Australia's top children's authors, including Libby Gleeson, Robin Klein, Phil Cummings, Nette Hilton, Kate Walker, Colin Thiele, Richard Tulloch and many others. When submitting *Fuzz the Famous Fly* to Dyan Blacklock in 1997, Emily admitted to once seeing 'a fly in a cookery magazine, and one of Bob's building pictures has a fly right in the middle, because it was sitting on the lens.' She was more discreet in the author

note at the back of the published volume:

> On TV you often see a fly buzzing around, if the show is about the outdoors. There have been flies in magazine pictures, too. I had always thought it was a different fly every time. But now I've started to wonder. Flies all look the same to us. But maybe there are special flies who try their hardest to be famous. Just like Fuzz.

With her new-found freedom, Emily also had the time and space to engage with the entire publishing journey for her titles, rather than just sending her latest manuscript off to the editor and starting on the next one. This naturally appealed to the publisher in her. For me, the best part of publishing – which I missed in my freelance years – was seeing a book's evolution across all its stages, from an early concept, perhaps the germ of an idea suggested by an author, through to the first advance copies sent by the printer. I think Emily is a completist, too. Even now, she remains committed to the entire publishing process for her books. No matter who acquires them, they are edited by Celia Jellett, before the acquiring publisher's editorial staff offer their own comments. 'Apart from mechanical things such as noticing repeated words, anomalies from earlier drafts or sameness in for example sentence openings, my job has always been to say if I find anything that I don't understand,' Celia told me.

Emily has a clear vision of how the book should look. She laughed wryly when she said, 'I'm the bane of my

publishers' lives, I think. I'm always interfering – rewriting their blurbs. They must expect me to. They probably put in all these little traps, like advertising people always put something in for the client to find that's wrong!'

'I like them to find a good, grabby coverline,' she insists. And she'll have a view on cover imagery – she insisted on monsters appearing on Deltora Quest instead of the heroes' faces. She told me …

> I feel as though the way it looks is so important – and the publisher does, too – and, of course, tastes differ, but I haven't ever had a real hassle or tussle. I think if the author can have a fairly clear vision of the cover it helps. It's like having the title before you start is such a help. I haven't always. But it's difficult when you don't.

Long before presenting manuscripts to publishers, even before completing drafts, Emily thinks about potential formats and structures. On a single page in the notebook devoted to The Three Doors trilogy, Emily wrote the heading 'Choices' and proposed four different packages for the series, covering options such as publishing three volumes simultaneously, packaged together or sold singly, or perhaps one volume with 'doors' bound into it. She noted the pros and cons of each – based on cost, accessibility and the challenges of offering a satisfying conclusion to the story arc. In the end, *The Golden Door*, *The Silver Door* and *The Third Door* were published as separate volumes eight months apart.

Throughout the process, Emily has the backing of her

agent. Back in the 1970s, Dyan Blacklock had been at uni with Jane Covernton, and following an early publishing role, a total retreat to a rural life in NSW, then a stint as a librarian at the Sydney school I attended, by which time I knew her as a successful writer of children's fiction and non-fiction, Dyan returned to Adelaide in the late 1990s. There, she worked for Omnibus, building author brands in an increasingly competitive local market, and developing their internationally successful 'Solo' early readers series. It was Emily who encouraged Dyan Blacklock to pursue her idea of becoming an agent and offered herself as a client. You could call it another dowry, perhaps.

Dyan described to me her experience of agenting Emily:

> I have the pleasure of first reading like a child – not looking for flaws, just soaking in the story. Details are important to Emily. We often joke about having to take off the publisher hat sometimes but that is hard to do. Emily understands every single element of publishing a book – from the reps to the budget to the printed page and everything in between. I can have intelligent, honest discussions with her about it all. I can honestly say I've never had a relationship like it with any other creator. She is a friend. A very dear friend.

The breadth of Emily's writing expanded substantially very quickly in the 1990s. In addition to stand-alone novels, she began producing complex series. The three best known are Fairy Realm (for six- to eight-year-olds),

Teen Power Inc (for tweens) and Deltora Quest (which are deliberately accessible to readers of high interest but lower ability when it comes to engagement with books).

Emily shared with *The Book Curator* magazine how Fairy Realm came about and why it was published under the pseudonym Mary-Anne Dickinson. (The name 'was a sort of private joke. I'd written my BA Honours thesis on George Eliot [Mary-Anne Evans] and my MA thesis on Emily Dickinson.')

> When I was at *The Weekly* I had lunch with my friend Judith Curr, who was publisher at Transworld. Judith told me she had seen a concept at a book fair where books were packaged with objects. She wanted to do a series called Storytelling Charms that came with a charm bracelet and little charms. I thought it was a great idea. Then she asked me to write them. At that stage I had only written those award-winning types of books which were more literary in style. They were also very much for both genders. This series was about fairies and was obviously intended for little girls. It didn't seem appropriate to write them under Emily Rodda, so we went with Mary-Anne Dickinson.

Emily presented a detailed proposal in a fax to Judith Curr:

> As you will see, the idea I have conceived for the series is fairly pure fantasy. I believe this suits the junior girls you are after. The 'real world' the heroine inhabits is

> very ordinary. The fantasy world she enters is a mixture of glamour and comedy. I have previously found this to be a successful mix. Given the present rising tide of interest in fairies (seems to be a ten–fifteen-year cycle!) I have chosen to use a kind of 'fairyland' for my fantasy. This gives us a wide selection of fantasy characters to choose from to create the tension in sequels.

Emily decided which charms would be appropriate to which story – and the appeal of collectability must have lodged permanently in her mind then, finding another outlet eight years later in the first series of Deltora Quest. The first two books, *The Charm Bracelet* and *The Flower Fairies*, were published in 1994, with colour illustrations by Veronica Oborn. They were successful and Emily had enjoyed writing them, so she wrote four more titles for 1995 (*The Third Wish*, *The Last Fairy-Apple Tree*, *The Magic Key* and *The Unicorn*). However, it became uneconomical to keep reprinting the books (always in smaller quantities than the initial runs) with their charms, so in time the books went out of print.

David Francis, then publisher at ABC Books, decided to reissue them without the charms and colour illustrations under the series name Fairy Realm. 'Published this way the stories reached a much wider market. They also began selling overseas, notably to the US and Japan,' Emily said. 'They sold well and once they were all in print I was asked to write a second series of four. I then wrote *The Star Cloak*, *The Water Sprites*, *The Peskie Spell* and *The Rainbow Wand*.'

*

With the 30-book Teen Power Inc. series, Emily also took the unusual step for an author of developing intellectual property (IP). This entails working up concepts, storylines and character briefs but outsourcing the actual writing to others. (This is the only Emily Rodda series to be co-authored.) With different authors working simultaneously, the whole publication process speeds up, generating a critical mass of titles which establishes the books in the market quite quickly. It's financially advantageous to the creator, who not only gets generous royalties from the books but extra income from adaptations in other media and foreign translation. Across a large number of simultaneous titles, this can be lucrative. It also allows for greater creative control and consistency for the originating creator.

The project was suggested by Ken Jolly, MD of Scholastic Australia, who wanted to publish a home-grown mass market series, to compete with all the American imports that flooded the Australian market, such as The Baby-Sitters Club and Goosebumps. Such books sold in vast quantities through Scholastic's very successful and trusted book clubs and fairs.

Emily found the idea intriguing and followed up promptly with a fax to her old boss, David Harris. In late 1992, Emily wrote to Harris:

> There are two ways we could go. The first is to put together a series that is basically an 'anthology' – similar stories under the same banner and with a series cover design. This, when you think about it, is very like

What all publishers try to do with series of any sort. It can work, of course, but the great problem in building it quickly is finding a sufficient number of good novels to fit the format, and avoiding 'desperation' choices to feed the series.

The second idea is to do something that I don't think any general Australian publisher has done before. This is to produce the series in the same way as a production house creates a TV soap opera. The originator of the series produces a set of characters, a setting, and a basic rationale, then goes on to produce storylines for individual episodes. These episodes may then be written up by the originator or by others, but the originator always controls the finished scripts, so as to ensure quality and consistency.

I find the second idea quite exciting. It's an interesting concept, and given the desire to get a lot of books in print quickly, I believe it has more chance of succeeding as a whole than the 'anthology', always provided that we hit on the right set of characters, settings, etc on which to base the series. Ashtons is big enough, and commercially minded enough, to be the ideal publishers to take the plunge.

If Ashtons wants to try it, and we can agree on terms, I would be willing to take responsibility for the series – producing detailed storylines (like film treatments) for each title in the series, 'sub-letting' individual books to

suitable authors, checking them over for 'series quality and consistency' on delivery to produce final drafts, liaising with the freelance or in-house editors working on each book, consulting on covers etc. Ideally I'd like to write the first couple of titles myself to set the style, and in fact I'd do another two in the first year if time allowed. We could either invent an author name for the series, under which everyone wrote, or use the Emily Rodda name plus the actual author's name on individual titles in some form or another. I can't quite decide which would be best. Both options have their up- and down-side.

Obviously if the mechanism works well it could be used again and again to produce other series. It would be a fascinating experiment.

Emily proposed terms for herself as series editor and author, and for her co-writers, which Scholastic agreed to just before Christmas 1992; and early in 1993, she followed up with another detailed fax detailing two scenarios:

A group of teenagers live in a typical quiet Australian suburban street. It is leafy with gum trees and is a dead end, having bush (crown land) at one end of it. Most of the kids have lived in the street since they were much younger, and know each other, and the adults in the street, some of whom are quite eccentric, very well.

Their lives change dramatically when their street is selected as one of several possible sites for the filming of a

new TV soap opera. The first book in the series tells of the controversy on the street when this happens, the rivalry between our kids and others (some of whom are quite capable of dirty tricks to secure the glamorous prize) who live on other possible sites, the eventual decision to use their street, the meetings with the actors, director, etc, the making of the pilot programme, and the news that the series has been bought by a network and will continue. Tensions, problems, mysteries, dramas and plenty of comic moments are possible within this framework.

The sequels go on from there. The kids have their own real-life adventures, mysteries to solve, difficulties etc, sometimes caused by, sometimes running parallel to, sometimes complicated by, the difficulties, comedies and adventures being acted out by the showbiz types who have entered their lives.

The soap opera becomes very popular, and its episodes from book to book tend to reflect t he m ore mundane problems and mysteries the kids encounter in their daily lives.

She pointed out the appeal of TV soaps to children – this being the early- to mid-1990s –and their fascination with the actors who star in them. She noted: 'Soap opera producers do actually use real streets/towns for their outdoor filming, and sometimes for indoor. They have agreements with the householders in these sites (we once did a story at *The Weekly* about the real people of Ramsay Street).'

The second idea shared the same suburban setting, though it could be a country town.

A group of teenagers who live in the same district or small country town and go to the same school decide that they're sick of being permanently penniless and decide to form their own mini employment agency the motto of which is 'We'll do anything'. This is of course very similar to The Baby-Sitters Club in concept, which is a big drawback, but I am attracted to it because of the Minder type plot opportunities inherent in the idea of the kids going into all sorts of different situations, getting into messes, discovering and solving all sorts of problems etc., etc. Possibly the varied nature of the work and the adventure/mystery element would deflect attention from the similarity. The jobs the kids are hired to do can be very varied, of course. I'd check regulations to make sure we don't suggest anything illegal.

The 'job' theme would provide a very handy modus operandi whereby the characters could become naturally involved in large numbers of different sorts of adventures/mysteries. The scenario gives ample opportunity for humour, interesting adult characters, different settings, domestic snippets etc to run along with the main plot. I feel it would be attractive to primary kids because of the money-making aspect, in which I find they are very interested, the idea of 'having a job, which is also interesting, the natural weaving of pets into the storyline (dogs, cats, guinea pigs, parrots and things even more unusual that they are hired to care for) and the 'organisation' or 'club' theme. In this scenario the characters of the main kids

concerned would be of particular importance. They would be fairly diverse with a wide rage of talents (and failings). Jobs undertaken would be sometimes done in groups, sometimes done singly.

It seems *obvious* to me that she chose the latter option. A strong work ethic has driven Emily her entire life. As she said to Jennifer Byrne: 'It was very important not to appear incapable of doing [both a career and family].' She concluded, 'You did get the best of both worlds; you also got very tired.' When challenged about how she found time to write as well, it became a reflex to wonder how - if speaking to a woman - they had time to do their nails. Emily's mantra was consistent. 'I think that people always make time for anything they really want to do,' she told Karen Spresser.

The world of work offers more than background in Emily's stories, it's a driver of plot: from the age-old concept of quests and labours in all the high fantasies, to the rural economy background to *Bungawitta*, to the worlds of publishing and beauty in the Birdie books (and Birdie's own role as a TV researcher which is her way into amateur sleuthing). Then there's the Hoopers Bend store, the holiday cabins in *Eliza Vanda's Button Box* … Liz is the founder of Teen Power Inc. I think we'd call her an empath, these days; she really cares about other people and likes to be liked. She has a strong moral conscience. Then there's Richelle, the pampered 'princess of the family', obsessed with her appearance and being 'discovered' by a film producer

or modelling agency. But she's street smart too and has the kind of personality that attracts other people to fall in with her ideas. Sunny is the sporty one; her dad is a famous tennis player but he lives overseas so her family comprises her mum and sisters. Like Sunny, Tom has divorced parents but his life complicated by a stepfather and stepsiblings. He's messy by nature and a bit of a joker (which is a sort of defence mechanism). Nick is an only child, super cool and interested in money, business and tech. Then there's Elmo, whose dad Zim runs the local paper (which was established by his father). It's facing competition from a more glamorous rival but who is it who really wants the business to fail – and why? Elmo's media background, with its strong lineage, makes him my favourite character of the series.

To me, the Teen Power titles are '*Weekly*' books – inspired by Emily's awareness of the tension and complexity of modern life for families, especially multi-generational families. The 30 books each stand alone but together form a huge mural of Australian society in the mid-1990s.

From the illustrations alone, we can infer the children in Emily's first three children's books are of WASP origin, traditional nuclear families living the Australian dream, whereas the cast of Teen Power are more diverse, reflecting multicultural Australia. From the artwork brief Emily provided, we know that 'Liz is your basic Anglo Australian, with straight, shiny, mid-length, mid-brown hair and hazel eyes and is interesting, lively and attractive-looking without being a real beauty.' Richelle, Nick and Tom are of similar stock and background. Sunny is partly of Chinese heritage and Nick's family is Greek.

(In *Bungawitta*, Cookie Liu the former postmaster could be Chinese. In *The Shop at Hoopers Bend*, Emily included the indigenous Twelvetrees family among her characters.)

Jenny Pausacker was keen to accept the creator's invitation to write for the series. 'I've always been fascinated by the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which produced the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series, so I wanted to see what it would be like to write from someone else's synopsis.' She knew that Emily's idea of a good story would be compatible with her own. 'I learned a lot. Among my own books, the Blake mystery series is one of my favourites and its plotting wouldn't have been anywhere near as good if I hadn't worked as Emily's apprentice. Oh, and I loved writing in the voice of the airhead Richelle – that was an inspired piece of casting against type.'

Emily supplied her co-authors with detailed synopses, the draft of her own first book, the 'bible' for the series, detailing character arcs, local history and geography, a specially formatted version of Microsoft to use for consistency and ease of editing.

Emily would then work through the authors' drafts and edits to ensure consistency across the series – although she feels you could tell who wrote which. 'Duncan's were a bit edgier,' she suggested. Daughter Kate (Sam Kester) and husband Bob (Robert Sexton) also contributed to the series, under pseudonyms. But, she added, 'I soon realised there was just about as much work in [editing] than there was in writing them myself.'

*

Deltora Quest was launched in 2000, but Emily had been planning it for two years before she wrote the first book, *The Forests of Silence*. And as we'll see in Chapter 7, Deltora had its origins in much earlier books. But this chapter seems to be the right place to talk about the collaborative elements of the series. Emily wrote all the texts, of course, but Kate provided the graphics for all the books, and Kate and Bob both helped Emily design the layouts, spreading pages out on the dining-room table, to ensure that the artwork was accurately paced throughout each volume. It was important to keep the books within the desired page count so Emily would cut lines if the text overran in the page proofs.[7]

Then there's the wonderful contribution by illustrator Marc McBride. He is originally from Northern Ireland, and has a background in advertising, film and TV, which gave him the perfect sensibility to work on a mass market series. He had specialised in creating stunning renditions of strange creatures which earned him the moniker the 'Monster Illustrator'. His own book, *World of Monsters*, won an Aurealis award (a major accolade in the field of Australian speculative fiction).

Marc met Emily in the late 90s when he was showing publishers his portfolio, seeking work. One of the firms he approached was Scholastic. He told me …

> When I found out they were creating a new series with monsters in it (believe it or not, monsters weren't fashionable in children's books back then), I knew I had to take my chance to get on board. I painted the first three Deltora Quest covers knowing very little about the project. Emily had given Scholastic a description of the belt and the first three monsters so I had something to go on back in my Bondi studio. I took them on the train to Scholastic a week later and got the job! Some months after that I got to meet her for the first time. By this stage I'd illustrated all the covers. Emily gave me a warm hug and said the covers were exactly how she'd imagined them. I was very pleased with this as I'd only had the description of the monsters and the belt! Getting to know Emily over the years, we discovered we have many favourite books in common and I always found it a dream working with her.

From providing covers only for series 1, 2 and 3, Marc McBride moved on to illustrate full-colour plates for 2005's *Tales of Deltora,* which contains the 'secret history of Deltora' – 'all the folk tales of the seven tribes' including the Tenna Birdsong Tales which are individual fables that collectively tell the story of the land. In 2008, the more elaborate *Secrets of Deltora* was published, with a 3-D effect lenticular cover and a foldout map. This book is described as 'part journal, part travel guide'

and collects the records of Doran the Dragonlover who travelled around Deltora. McBride's illustrations are a mix of labelled diagrams, scenes and drawings of people and creatures. He went on to say …

> Our working relationship over the years has always been amazing from my point of view, I appreciate how lucky I've been to work alongside such a true talent. Sometimes Emily gives me specific, detailed instructions for what a monster should look like. Other times she leaves it up to me, asking, for example, for a large menacing creature or one that lives underwater. Usually I get it right, although I do remember for the Isle of the Dead cover, she asked for a kelp-like monster. For some reason I thought she meant a carp-like monster. The scary goldfish monster never got past the first sketch, but Emily laughed and asked how someone living in Bondi could get kelp and carp mixed up!

In the NCACL files, there are pages of correspondence with McBride, especially concerning the two full-colour spin-off titles, with frank – but friendly – discussions about subject matter, tone and composition, such as this from January 2005, when they were working on *Tales from Deltora.*

> I like the composition of this one much better, but now I'm worried that I shouldn't have suggested you draw the Shadow Army at all. It's true the last pic was probably too grotesque, but the trouble is, the Greers ARE grotesque.

They are literally described as 'faceless' in the text, because their faces are sort of half-formed, though they can see, and grunt and so on. Even in the first rough, they were less 'faceless' than I had imagined. In this rough, they look far too much like ordinary human people (though not the prettiest!), and that won't do.

But I think your instinct is quite right. The picture will be pure horror if you give the Greers faces that are just lumps and folds of flesh with mouths and eyes. It might put people off the book entirely. It might give kids terrible dreams.

I've never done this to you before, and I'm very sorry about the waste of time, but I think we should abandon this idea and go back to the other suggestion for this story, the dragon fighting the Ak-Baba in the sky (see the brief in my earlier memo). That will be scary, but not stomach-churning.

The partnership with Emily Rodda has now spanned twenty years and they are good friends, which resulted in an unexpected collaboration in 2019. *The Glimme* proved to be an irresistible challenge, as Emily explained to young fan Declan of Lidcombe Public School in an interview for the NSW Premier's Reading Challenge in 2021.[8] McBride got in touch with a folder of images. He said he'd been trying to write a fantasy about a boy who liked to draw but he couldn't get the story right.

He suggested Emily might have an idea that needed this kind of illustration, or even the bones

of a plot. Emily was conflicted: she had her own books to write, but Marc was a friend … At least she could look at the images he sent …

> And, oh my goodness, I mean, if you read *The Glimme*, you've seen what that artwork looks like … those dragons flying in the sky. And as soon as I saw them, I thought, 'They look so real! I feel as if I could just walk into those pictures and be in that world.' So I immediately thought the pictures could be in a gallery. And you went in through behind one of the pictures and there was this world with those giants and those men with lions' heads and those dragons and that amazing castle.

Emily sent Marc an outline, which retained the spirit of the idea of a boy who loved to draw, but was a very different story otherwise. 'I would send him chapter by chapter. And he would illustrate chapter by chapter, sometimes using pictures he already had and sometimes doing new ones. It was a wonderful collaboration. We had a very, very good time doing it. But I've never ever done a book like that before.'[9]

'To this day I still send Emily drawings and paintings of centaur armies, giants and strange monsters that end up in my sketchbook,' Marc assured me …

> If Emily feels inspired she gets back to me, if not I don't hear from her. She is a true writer and from what I have observed she takes on the story only when it's right. To me writing the kind of stories Emily comes

up with is like catching lightning in a bottle – it's pure magic! I'm still hopeful we will one day work together again and the magic can happen again!

6

Retail Therapy

Suburbia. The very word sinks hearts and is often derided in fiction. A desire to escape soul-crushing urban roots has fuelled many a plot in novels for every age group. But in Emily Rodda's books, living the middle-class dream actually provides settings for stories of imagination and freedom. The instinct and urge to spend money ensures that shopping centres and department stores – permanent features of the Australian suburban landscape since Emily's own 1950s childhood – feature in plenty of her stories. These cathedrals to commerce can be as enchanted as palaces and caves under the sea.

The Teen Power stories bear this out. Major scenes in the fifth mystery, *Beware the Gingerbread House*, occur in Raven Hill Mall. The gang have been employed by Hazel Sweet who runs the Gingerbread House, a cake shop that looks like the witch's house in *Hansel and Gretel*. The job involves wearing rabbit costumes to promote the shop but it's not an easy gig. A rival gang is encroaching on Teen Power's turf, and beyond the sinister goings-on in the shop, there's an internationally renowned villain lurking in plain sight at the mall.

Central character Sunny is cynical of the allusion to fairy tales to front a commercial enterprise. But she's

unnerved, too, by the residual chill of the classic tales she learned as a small child, especially those that snag on memories of her dad who left the family for a new life in America. Now Dad has returned, wanting to lure his talented gymnast daughter away.

As the story reaches its climax, the reader needs to visualise the layout of the mall, like those store guides you see at information desks – or the snakes-and-ladders grid of a computer game – because the location of people and shops is an all-important clue. In *The Julia Tapes*, Emily's only novel aimed at a teenage readership so far, our narrator, Julia, recalls a chilling incident that happened to her mother in Grace Brothers, in Macquarie Centre in Sydney's north-west. Mum was …

> walking through on her way from the parking area to a coffee shop where she was going to meet her friend. Department stores always put Mum in a strange mood – or she says they do. She says it's the lights or the music or something. And the crowds.
>
> This day, she wasn't thinking about anything in particular – just concentrating on weaving through all these people clustered around tables of things on sale. She was nearly at the doors when a strange-looking woman who was standing at a table of scarves suddenly swung round at her, grinning into her face – sort of leering, Mum said – in this really terrifying way, and cooed at her in a low, musical, intimate voice, 'Isn't this nice?'

> Mum screamed her lungs out.
>
> Everything stopped, she said. There was absolute silence, except for the music. She remembers looking around at all these shocked faces. Then she realised that the strange-looking woman had a scarf in her hand, and had been talking to a friend of hers who was standing just behind Mum.
>
> Mum says she couldn't say anything. I mean, she couldn't explain why she'd screamed. She could hardly say, 'Sorry, madam, I thought you were a madwoman', could she? So she walked away, very quickly.'

This actually happened to Emily herself! And that such an indelible insight into the frailties of human nature is available in Grace Brothers is definitely worth recording. Why do people venture into unchartered parts of the world for insight and revelation into the truth of human nature when you can find what you need in North Ryde or perhaps even Rundle Mall?

The Julia Tapes is a story of strong female friendship in which three teenage girls – narrator Julia, who is recording her story from a hospital bed onto a cassette for her teacher Ms Kneebone, Claude and Fran – make their first-ever unaccompanied trip away from home to Fran's grandparents' place at Porcupine Bay. There's a self-contained flat, where they can live their best lives as sensible, sophisticated young adults … but things go wrong from the planning stages.

Although dedicated to her parents, this was a book written with one of her children in mind. Kate was 13, an avid reader who had run out of books she wanted to read. 'Everything was about someone with leukaemia or something,' Emily lamented in our interview. She'd spoken before about her regret that in 'children's literature now we make grim and reality synonymous.' Channelling Pollyanna, again, perhaps, but it was a very real concern: 'If we don't help children maintain optimism there is no future for them.'[1]

To restore Kate's faith in the pleasures of reading …

> I gave her *Three Men in a Boat*, which I think is one of the funniest books ever written, and she loved it. Then we got on to adult fiction which is what my friends and I were reading way back then when there was no such thing as YA fiction. I suppose these days [if it were newly published] Jane Eyre would be YA.

Very much tongue-in-cheek, *The Julia Tapes* has moments of real tension – the girls are confronted by a flasher, an axe-wielding neighbour, and where exactly are Fran's grandparents …? There's a lot about sex and sexuality in the book, too, for all the lightness, and an alarming scene, perhaps undercooked, when the girls are confronted by a flasher. Maybe it was a step too far, although Anne Briggs, reviewing the book in *Magpies* in September 1999, emerged a fan:

> Julia's commentary on life, marriage, menstruation, fashionable social mores and mobile phones is delivered in a quirky, original style that will delight young people, and upper primary girls in particular. Teachers or parents may be disconcerted by some mildly earthy language and scatological humour, but there is no doubt the author has hit her mark with the intended audience.

The Julia Tapes reprinted in Australia and sold to an American publisher. Emily reflected 'but it never really thrived'. Perhaps it should have been marketed at even older children. 'But I have met many people who had it and loved it. It served its purpose!'

Death in Store is the title of a collection of short stories featuring amateur sleuth Verity Birdwood and her best friend Kate Delaney. In the title story, Kate finds her Christmas-time department store experience just as uncomfortable as Julia's mother did in *The Julia Tapes*.

Kate, a book editor (just like the author), has a sentimental – possibly romantic – side to her and it's that which has led her to Fredericks', Sydney's famous flagship department store. In my mind, it's modelled on Myer – which was Grace Brothers in my childhood – on the corner of George and Market Streets. Kate wants to introduce her daughter Zoe to the legendary Father Christmas of Kate's own childhood.

Like most settings in golden-age-inspired crime fiction, Fredericks' has a genteel, archaic feel to it. So Kate's astounded when Santa breaks with the script and

over-promises to Zoe … Kate even reconsiders last year's in-store Father Christmas experience; despite being light on authenticity, at least that Santa didn't overcommit harried parents.

From then on, the magic of Christmas is pretty much wiped out:

> The cafeteria was crowded with women slumped exhausted in chairs surrounded by bulging plastic bags, and children drinking milkshakes while jealously guarding their own special parcels which often included a little package, the gorgeously gold-beribboned trophy of their visit to Fredericks' Santa.

But Kate won't surrender the spirit of Christmas entirely, especially when joined by her cynical, unsentimental friend Verity Birdwood who – though ill-suited to the task – has been sent to research a TV programme about Christmas at the venerable department store. 'I've never seen anything like it,' Birdie opines.

> 'Like lemmings, they all are. The money! The plastic, I should say. You can smell it. Hot plastic. Click, click, fifty dollars, sixty dollars, a hundred dollars. Spending like there's no tomorrow, the lot of them. Ludicrous. The staff are run off their feet and cranky as blazes, the shoplifters are out in force, taking everything they can lay their hands on, the management's on tenterhooks because Christmas makes or breaks the place … there's a story here all right, but those idiots don't want it. They want some drivelling piece all tidings of comfort and joy. It's sickening.'

While the staff address department heads as Mrs or Mr, beneath the polite facades, personal grievances and inadequacies chafe, and the class-inspired 'us and them' mentality creates a gulf between the haves and the have nots. At first glance, however, there seems no reason why beloved Ben Bluff, aka Santa Claus, should be found murdered in his dressing room, a pair of scissors firmly planted in his back. And why is his murder followed by the killing of scantily clad Santa's helper, again stabbed, her head bashed in when her body plummets down a lift shaft?

The answers, when Birdie unravels them, display the basest human urges; not gaudy at all, and hardly in the spirit of Christmas.

Perhaps Emily's best-loved retail scenario is in *Finders Keepers*, and its sequel, *The Timekeeper*. Emily described the book to Alf Mappin:

> It's about a little boy and he's the middle child in a family. I suppose because I have a middle child myself who's a boy, I have a lot of sympathy with that particular situation. You know, you've got the old child who can do everything and has that independence and you've got the kid who is the baby and the other child is somehow stuck in the middle. Patrick … is a bit like that. He's not unhappy, he's just a bit crowded by the other people in the house. And like a lot of boys that age, one of the things he's really interested in is computers and another thing is television and quiz programmes. He gets caught up in a fantasy which involves going to

> a very special quiz programme called *Finders Keepers* which is a kind of treasure hunt. It involves crossing over into another time stream and getting back with the objects he has to find.[2]

Chapter Two sees Patrick and his best friend wandering along the high street, a similar suburban setting to Marley Street in *The Best-Kept Secret*, perhaps. Like most children, their conversation focuses on acquisitions – what would you do if you had a million dollars? None of the local shops are particularly useful – there's an estate agent, a shop that sells office furniture, a shut-up dry cleaner's – but at last he comes to 'the most interesting shop in the whole street – by a very long way' which sells computers. In this shop, Patrick plays on one of the machines and receives the invitation that changes his life:

> CONGRATULATIONS PATRICK!
> YOU ARE NOW INVITED TO COMPETE IN
> FINDERS KEEPERS
> THE MILLION-DOLLAR TV GAME SHOW
> … DO YOU ACCEPT THE INVITATION?

There's only time to type 'Yes' before the store owner hounds him out. Then begins the agonising wait till 8 am on Saturday morning – that's if the TV station he's been told to tune into actually exists, let alone the programme with its glamorously named host, Lucky Lamont. Patrick's plans to watch look set to be thwarted when his mother Judith hauls him off to Chestnut Tree Village Shopping Centre to buy new sneakers – as previously arranged.

The focal feature of the shopping centre is the elaborate clock, shaped like a chestnut tree. Beneath it stands the figure of a blacksmith, holding a hammer which he strikes every quarter and half hour, once, and then, on the hour, multiple times, punching out chimes. Birds come out of the foliage, cheeping away, a squirrel appears from a hollow in the trunk and the sun bursts out behind. It reminds me of one of the scenes on the side of the music box that is the key to Rondo.

The clock illustrates a beautiful aspect of Emily's plotting. In response to being asked how she draws the various threads of her plots together, Emily told Alf Mappin, she found that 'if you wait long enough most things do have a meaning.' While she was writing the book, the clock 'seemed to me to become more interesting than that particular part of the plot warranted'. It just didn't fit in with the trajectory of the story. Then, 'When I got to the end and talked about it with the editor and she wanted to know … how the Barrier worked … I suddenly realised why the clock was there.'[3]

What Emily loves best of all as a writer are 'things that all tie up … There's no little clue that doesn't have a meaning and I suppose it's the fascination for someone who likes word games or likes doing tapestry … maybe it's a response to the general messiness of life but I find it very satisfying.'[4]

Jenny Pausacker confirmed this to me when she described the process of working with Emily's outlines on the Teen Power books. 'Every now and then,' she said, 'I'd think that one of the details was a bit extraneous, so I'd leave that aspect out, but I always had to go back and

put it in again, because it would turn out that she was foreshadowing a new development or describing a minor everyday incident that would have the effect of making the villain's motivation feel more plausible.'

Back to *Finders Keepers* and its riff on the retail landscape. If not ancient exactly, the Barrier is very old but it's been commercialised in recent years. Max Treweek, computer engineer, combined his fascination with the Barrier with his interest in computers to develop a way to bring people from one side of the Barrier to the other, thus devising an irresistible premise for a TV game show.

The idea was simple (as we're reminded in the 'Notes on *Finders Keepers*' at the start of the sequel).

> Three viewers who'd lost something through the Barrier were chosen each week to be Seekers. Using the computer I would bring a Finder, a contestant from the Other Side, to meet the Seekers and appear to our audience. Then I'd send the Finder back to find each missing object in turn and win a prize.

The quest is beset with danger – too much time across the Barrier could see the Finders suffer from Trans Barrier Effect (TBE); at its worst, that leads them to fading away altogether. (TBE … reminds me of TUFFS in *The Battle for Rondo*, and the UEF in *Pigs Might Fly*. Emily is right on the money, alluding to the obsession with shortening brand names to make them punchier, more agile, better suited to the evolving time-poor, money-rich society. The banks seemed keenest of all to rebrand: WestPac, ANZ, even CommonwealthBank, word marked as one urgent entity.)

*

The clock takes on new significance in the sequel, set one week after Patrick's adventure. On Saturday morning, Dad takes the three Minton children to Cherry Tree Plaza (to get rid of them so he can work at home). Patrick is pleased because, having waited so long for his own computer, he's dismayed that the Finders Keepers program from the machine he won in the first book is faulty.

But all is not well – the clock is five minutes fast and what's more, when Patrick tumbles through the Barrier instead of landing in the TV studio, he's outside amid a scene of great commotion and unrest. There's been a huge rent in the Barrier for the past week. Opinion is divided: is it a once-a-century phenomenon that will right itself or something more serious? Who is to blame?

Patrick witnesses the harsh reality of the cult of celebrity when Boopie is vilified. Everyone involved with the Channel 8 programme *Finders Keepers* is blamed – because they've let in too many Finders over the years. But because Boopie is instantly recognisable, she is subject to the harshest vitriol from the viewing public.

Finders Keepers has enjoyed a long and prosperous life, partly thanks to reaching new audiences when it was adapted early on for TV. (*The Timekeeper* emerged from storylines created for the series.) In October 1991, publisher Jane Covernton wrote to tell Emily that not only had *Finders Keepers* won the children's choice Young Australians Best Book Award (YABBA)[5] but that the entire first print run – 10,000 copies – of the paperback had sold out on the strength of the TV series;

and a fresh run of 10,000 copies was in hand. Support for the book was strong across the trade with mass market retailer K-Mart taking quantities as well as the traditional bookselling chains, Collins and A&R Bookworld. Jane Covernton was also pursuing US interest in other titles.[6]

There's no doubt that *Finders Keepers* is rooted in the mundanity of family life. Many families would have recognised this scenario …

> Sunday was wet and miserable and Danny was bored and miserable. By midmorning Paul and Judith were only too happy to consider going to Chestnut Tree Village for lunch … As they drove, splashing through puddles, into the car park, it became clear that a lot of other parents had decided to save their sanity by using the Village as a giant playground for an hour or two. The car park seethed with hopeful-looking men and women pushing strollers and leading impatient toddlers toward the delights of McDonald's, the coin-operated rides, and the toy departments of the various stores.

But the lure of 'What if?' is never far from any situation, however stressful or compromised. A twenty-minute bus ride into the centre of Sydney can be an equally rich source of mischief and magic, as Emily shared in her opening address for the Story Time Exhibition at the National Library of Australia on 16 August 2019. Cue another wonderful Alex and Clem story, from around

the time Tom's granny fell in the freezer (see Chapter 2). Mother and sons were travelling into town on a bus 'when a lady wearing a full-length fur coat got in. The lady was wearing a lot of make-up, and looked rather bad tempered …

> 'Mum!' Alex said in a piercing stage whisper. 'A bear!'
>
> The people near us heard, and laughed. The lady in the fur coat didn't. I mumbled apologies and tried discreetly to tell Alex and Clem that this was no bear, but a woman in a furry coat. They clearly thought I was wrong, or else just preferred their interpretation of what they were seeing. They went on staring at the lady, their eyes on stalks.
>
> Finally Alex, who was always the outgoing twin, leaned forward. 'Could you please take off your gloves?' he asked the lady, very politely.
>
> 'Why does he want me to take off my gloves?' the lady snapped at me.
>
> I knew only too well. At the time, I was so embarrassed that I lost my head and the truth slipped out. 'I think he wants to see your claws,' I said, and the whole bus broke up.

To Emily, this story was a 'perfect example of the way young children see the world – as a place of infinite

possibilities'. But it's not confined to childhood. Emily views the imagined characters in her stories as vividly as real people she knows – even the baddies. Her mantra is consistent: 'To write something, you have to believe it. To invent a world, you have to live in it.'[7]

And it seems our author is willing to believe in *anything* she finds credible. One of the questions Emily was asked during the *Guardian* webinar was, 'Do you believe in mythical creatures?' Her reply was careful and thoughtful:

> I do want to believe in mythical creatures – let's put it that way. And I often feel I see them, to my family's disgust! I see dragons in the sky. I see strange creatures wandering around the forest where I live. There are a lot of creatures we haven't actually discovered in our own world, so why shouldn't there be creatures we just think of as being mythical?

She sees the 'other' in people, too. Declan asked about the inspiration for Sheba in *Rowan of Rin,* the 'spinner of children's nightmares and curer of pains in the belly' who knows more than 'herbs and spells' and 'understands the mountains as ordinary people never will' and who *terrifies* shy Rowan. Emily replied, 'Sheba is the traditional wise woman witch figure. I have known various people who are, apparently, as venomous as Sheba is – who seem very nasty and perhaps are – and who seem connected to nature in a very unusual way.[8]

*

The latest 'retail' story, *The Shop at Hoopers Bend*, doesn't rely on the protagonist switching between worlds but is still imbued with magic because the child protagonist's world view permits it. Talking on a Facebook live interview at the time of publication, Emily explained how the book was a departure from her recent work …

> This was a different kind of story and it had to be told in a different kind of way. It's a real-life story – but with magic in it. The main character is really a little shop … one of those general stores that proliferated not only in the country but the city, too. They were almost community meeting places. Then supermarkets began and most of these little shops began to close.

Emily's great-uncle, Tom Rodda, owned and ran such a shop in Bullaburra in the Blue Mountains for years; Emily worked in it too when she was young, travelling from Sydney on the train with her grandmother and staying with Uncle Tom after his wife died. Years later, she reflected …

> It made me sad that these little shops, that were often quite isolated, just sat there, without having a proper place anymore. People would try to open things and it would never work. Six months later the candle shop would close, now it's a woodwork shop. The woodwork shop's closed, now it's second-hand books. I used to drive past, for years and years, and used

to wonder, 'What would work there?' Before pop-up shops started, I thought, what would work is if you just let it for a week. I even rang up the council to ask if this would be possible and they gave me the impression that yes, it would.

The main child character is orphan Jonquil Medway who lives with her late father's sister, Pam. Quil's unusual first name feels appropriate because jonquils aren't 'big and showy like daffodils. They looked like little stars perched on green wands and Quil had read that they had a strong, sweet scent'. Her prosaic surname feels right, too; it sounds like 'middle way', someone in between.

Quil is meant to be spending part of the summer at camp but aborts the plan when she finds a mug with her name on it from the Hoopers Bend Gallery (which might or might not exist), then meets Pirate, a lost-and-found dog who narrowly escapes an accident, then meets an unusual woman called Bailey.

For Quil, 'Meeting new adults was one thing. Meeting strange kids who were 'just her age' was misery.' One of the qualities that sets Quil apart from others is her conception of the world and the people in it being made of stardust – being composed of different characteristics that attract and repel. People think it's simplistic or just weird but it's actually complex, given the potential permutations, like Broon+Derba – 'cheery but boring' mixed with 'calm and reliable with no sense of humour' or Kell+Fiskin – 'prickly but interesting' mixed with 'self-absorbed, manipulative and bullying'. (How often do we

have to resist the temptation to put people into single boxes? This to me seems a good way to avoid that.) Quil is Palaris, Aunt Pam an Aginoth. 'They didn't understand each other, and probably never would. But they loved each other just the same.'

The Facebook interviewer was intrigued to know the origins of Quil's stardust theory. Emily gleefully admitted the idea was all her own …

> It occurred to me [it] might mean why you instantly get on with some people and sometimes feel you've known them before and other people you kind of bounce off, you can't ever get together. And it's true, too, there are some people you meet you instantly recoil from, with absolutely no fairness or justice about it. I'd always thought this was some kind of chemical thing but then I thought, maybe it's to do with the stardust.

Emily laughed when I reminded her that she'd gone on to say when she shared the theory with her children, they'd instantly rebuked her with, 'Mum, don't say that sort of thing outside the house to other people. It's much more complicated than that.'

'Well, sure,' Emily had admitted to her Facebook interviewer. 'I understand that. Nevertheless, it's basically true and so my character Quil came to the same realisation I did.' They were among the observations she learned to keep private because people would 'worry about you'. But she defends them to this day. She said to me, 'It wasn't

weird, it was just like – well, younger children ask and say the most amazing things, don't they? It's always been my view, why isn't it possible?' She accepts it wholeheartedly:

> It's just one of those things. I'm very bad at some things – like, I have no spatial sense at all. And as any member of the family will tell you, I'm very bad at maths and have strange views about maths. I know people who don't know their left from their right. I don't have to think about it but they do. I think we're all much stranger than we think.

'Strange' is offered as an observation, no hint of judgement, a genuine sense of awe and wonder. It's been a constant in Emily's life.

A good friend and colleague shared with me an anecdote she'd heard that when Emily first joined *The Australian Women's Weekly*, her way of getting to grips with the essential 'who's who' of celebrity culture was to think of it as a vast fantasy world of dynasties and descendants. More myth-making, perhaps?

I would never ask because I just want to believe it's true.

7

Across the Nine Seas

As I wrote in Chapter 1, Deltora Quest is a true publishing phenomenon. Since its release in 2000, the books have sold over 18 million copies in more than 30 countries.[1]

The first tranche of books comprised eight titles which tell the story of how our heroes, Lief, Jasmine and Barda, go on a perilous quest to find the seven gems that, when restored to a magic belt, will re-unite the disparate tribes of Deltora, and restore harmony to a once beautiful land. Two years later, Deltora Quest 2 was published. In this trilogy, our heroes explore the seas and islands of Deltora, this time to find the three parts of the fabled Pirran Pipe that have been dispersed as a result of a terrible war. It's the only way to save the enslaved Deltorans. These books are slightly longer than the first series. Longer still, and yet more complex, are the four books in series three, in which the latest threat to Deltora are the evil Four Sisters, created by the Shadow Lord who has tried to stop Lief, Jasmine and Barda at every turn. One by one, the sisters must be found and destroyed.

Deltora Quest allowed Emily's imagination free rein. She'd always loved the possibilities of fantasy as a literary form and had a clear understanding of its appeal:

> From way back in time people have told each other fantasy stories, from Greek mythology to fairy tales. I think one of the great things about fantasy is that it can discuss the really big issues in a way that people find interesting and exciting. The reader can use their imagination to make the story as wild as they like. People are empowered to take part in great quests and adventures with fantasy and that's thrilling for the reader. Readers can also engage with characters who can actually right wrongs in a way that it is hard to do in normal life.[2]

In addition, fantasy offers escapism. 'The beautiful thing about a fantasy world,' Emily told ABC TV's *The Mix,* 'is that if things aren't going well for you, you've got this other place you can go to.'

The series has the most wonderful – and mischievous – origins. In the opening sequence to *The Mix*, Emily referred to her experience of visiting schools to talk about her work. 'Right down the front under the teacher's eye, there'd be these naughty little boys, bored to tears.' Many of them weren't readers but they were 'full of intelligence, loved computer games'. From watching her own sons enjoy gaming, she realised the games industry adopted the tropes of classic fantasy stories.

She set herself – and her readers – a challenge: 'I'm going to show you can get more fun out of a book because it really is about your imagination.'

Reaching boy readers was key – she sensed they were not being catered for in the way that girls were.

And the success of the series seemed to vindicate that belief: at the Auckland Writers and Readers Festival, where she was on a panel with Irish writer Eoin Colfer, best known for the Artemis Fowl series of books and films, she admitted to compere Kate De Goldi that her books with boys as focal characters outsold those with girl protagonists. (The received wisdom being that boys won't read stories with female protagonists, but girls don't mind reading about boys.)

But it had taken Emily several books – and the experience of watching her three sons grow and mature – before she had the confidence to write from a male point of view. Her sons were still small children when she spoke to the *Sunday Mail* about the TV adaptation of *Grim Pickings.* Journalist Sasha Pedley noted that most writers are disappointed with the translation from book to screen, but Emily appreciated the contribution script writer Graeme Koetsveld brought to the project. She said, he's 'done a better job on the men in the book than I did. He's fleshed them out. My problem with [depicting] men is I don't understand them as well as I do women, so the input from a bloke has given some of my more lightly drawn male characters an added dimension.'[3]

Emily's ambition was welcomed, as this editorial feature in the CBCA national journal, *Reading Time*, makes clear:

> Literacy is rightly of major concern to educationalists, parents and, ultimately, employers. One of the

most effective weapons against poor literacy skills is practice, but these days books have to compete with TV, computers and video games in the indoor entertainment arena.

What can be done to woo children back to the written word and create a basic enthusiasm for reading? The answer lies in giving them stories to read that will set their imagination soaring, real page-turners that they just can't put down until they find out what happens next. Not only are young readers unconsciously absorbing words, they are seeing how words are written down to communicate ideas and information.

Says bestselling children's writer, Emily Rodda; 'If we don't give kids good, exciting books to read, they're not going to be interested in turning away from Nintendo and all of the other computer games. Boys in particular are notoriously unwilling to open up a book and settle in to reading, so we must offer them stories that are fast-paced, exciting and fun, with lots of twists and turns to intrigue.[4]

Emily explained the Deltora concept in a customarily detailed pitch document in 1999: 'Lief, Barda and Jasmine face terrible enemies and dangers, and in the end, with the help of various allies, human and exotic, find another of the gems, recover it from its terrible Guardian, and add it to the belt. They learn that each gem has its own special powers which help them to achieve its goals.' As

the trio become more successful, and their quest known to many, the risks and dangers intensify.

Deltora itself is part of a vast sea of connected islands and its stories have been recorded not only in the core books of the series and the illustrated spin-offs, but in The Three Doors Trilogy (2011-12)[5] and Star of Deltora, a quartet published in 2015 and 2016.

To coincide with the launch of Star of Deltora, Emily was interviewed by *Junior* magazine. She explained that 'I have always thought of my fantasy stories being set in the same ocean' and that she'd long wanted to explore some of the other worlds in the nine seas.

> This series takes place after the time of the Shadow Lord – when Deltora is rebuilding and has begun to trade with other islands as it used to before the Shadowlands invasion. The story begins in the city of Del, which is Deltora's most important trading centre because of its fine harbour. Most of the traders who sail the nine seas are based in Del, and the richest and most famous of them is Mab, owner of a large fleet of ships including the beautiful Star of Deltora. The story begins when Mab announces that she is to hold a contest to choose an apprentice and heir. Finalists in the contest will join Mab on a voyage to three secret island destinations, to compete for the glittering prize. So in these books I will have the chance to visit some of the many islands that share Deltora's world.[6]

Emily's chronicling of the sprawling archipelago had

begun quietly, modestly, years earlier with that first foray into high fantasy, the Rowan sequence of five books, published at irregular intervals over a ten-year period from 1993. The author note in *Star of Deltora* explains that the Rowan stories 'are set on an island that lies west of Deltora, across the Silver Sea. Deltorans call Rowan's island "Maris", because for centuries they have traded with the fish-like Maris people who live on the coast.' She added, 'One of Rowan's adventures also takes him on a quest to the nearby Land of the Zebak, a dangerous isle where trading ships never go.'

Some readers, like Declan from Lidcombe, have wondered when the Rowan stories are set. Emily replied, 'I'd say that, as far as our world is concerned, it's irrelevant.' Some people have suggested, she added, that it's a medieval setting because of the sorts of songs the characters sing and the fact that the villagers don't use modern machines. 'I prefer to think that Rowan's world is just to one side of ours,' she added, 'running alongside ours, and that if, in fact, we found the right seam, the right crack, the right hollow corner, we could actually go into there.'

Emily told me a lovely story about the writing of *Rowan of Rin*. One afternoon, she'd said to Bob, 'Would you mind watching the kids for a couple of hours? I've got this idea for this 32-page picture book.' She finally emerged several hours later saying, 'Oh dear, I seem to have 5,000 words,' which was the start of the novel. 'I just got enamoured of Rin and the whole world.' The whole process for her was liberating: 'I felt rather

naughty and adventurous because I had thrown everything aside. I think this was my first deliberate attempt to write just for children.'[6]

Still, she was pretty nervous about *Rowan of Rin*: 'I was convinced that no adults would like it because it was high fantasy and in those days that wasn't written for primary school aged children.' Before the arrival of Harry Potter, fantasy wasn't at all in vogue, in Australia – or anywhere, really. 'When I sent it to Omnibus Books I said, "You might not like this book but if you want to publish it just bear in mind that I want to write others." Fortunately, they came back and said they loved it.'[7]

Four more books followed *Rowan of Rin*: *Rowan and the Travellers*, *Rowan and the Keeper of the Crystal*, *Rowan and the Zebak* and *Rowan of the Bukshah*.

'The challenge, really, was writing the subsequent books,' she explained to *Classroom* magazine. After the first book, Emily realised …

> Rowan would have gained a lot of respect from the people in Rin and he will therefore be treated differently so you can't put him back into the same situation. On the other hand, he's still the same person. I'm pleased with the way he develops. He does gain in maturity and confidence but he still has doubts and he still feels like a bit of a fraud. He gets upset and worried if people think that he has magic powers because he knows he hasn't any. I think he gains a lot of dignity throughout the series and I'm pleased the way he ends up in *Rowan and the Bukshah*.

Even before she'd concluded Rowan's story Emily was keen to embark on another quest with more excitement, more puzzles and lots of action. She told *The Book Curator*: 'I wanted to create a series of books that allowed me to build a longer quest that went across a number of stories.'

In turn, Deltora Quest seems to have had an influence on the Rowan stories that followed it. Emily told *Classroom*:

> *Rowan and the Zebak* and *Rowan of the Bukshah* have more action in them. The other elements are the same. They're probably a bit faster moving. My own children have obviously grown older and I have been affected by what they like to read. In the interim, I've written Deltora Quest, and the enormous feedback I got from that made me try to keep sentences reasonably brief and to keep the action going. *Rowan of the Bukshah* is also quite a bit longer than the others and this worried me at first. But then I thought that it is the last one and I wanted to make sure it is just right.

The structure of Deltora Quest was an important consideration and crucial to its success. Emily knew that a big tome would be overwhelming to readers, but a sequence of short books, each one 'a bite', could tell the epic story just as well. So to Emily's mind, the books were 'effectively a serial, to be read sequentially, though the middle six could be read out of order without too much trouble.'[8] The release dates were scheduled accordingly: the series launched with books 1 and 2 in May 2000,

with a new book each subsequent month until November. The format caused much discussion amongst the judges for the 2001 CBCA Book of the Year Awards. 'The judges vacillated between wanting to consider the series as a single book – that is, a novel printed in eight parts – and finding a single book within the series which "stood alone" as an example of the quality of all the books.' Given the judging criteria, however, 'neither of those ideas provided a solution', leaving the judges disappointed that a series couldn't be shortlisted, though they were pleased to include Deltora Quest in the Notables.

Emily decided that each book should be 128 pages long, would feature a map at the beginning to show the journey of the heroes and the landmarks along the way, and be 'studded' (brilliant word) with 'brainteasers, puzzles, clues and mysteries the heroes must solve to avoid danger or fulfil the quest.' The language was another important consideration.

> I began wanting to keep the language unthreatening to all readers – not just those who were proficient readers already. As I went on to the end of Series 1 and then to Series 2 and then 3, I felt I could offer more challenges, because the more Deltora Quest books children had read, the more the story would pull them on, and the more comfortable with reading they would be becoming. I never underestimated the sophistication of my audience, even at the beginning. There's no doubt at all that my audience for Deltora Quest could grasp sophisticated themes. What some of them lacked was the reading experience, and therefore the confidence

> … So I tried to write a story that made sophisticated themes accessible.[9]

Then there was the characterisation. 'When I first thought about it,' she told *The Book Curator*, 'I started off wondering whether each book should have a different set of characters. But then I realised that if I was reading it, I would want them to be the same characters.'

> I wanted a boy and a girl, so that both boys and girls could read and connect with the story. The main character, Lief, had to be different from Rowan, who was my previous fantasy character. I thought it would be interesting for his future adventures if he was quite a streetwise and active person. The name Lief … I can't even remember when it first came to me. I think I liked it because it was unusual. It's a real name (and can be spelt Leif or Lief) and I probably played around with a few other names, but chose that one because it was short and sounded lively.
>
> Jasmine grew up in a forest and I chose her name because it's also the name of a flower. It contrasted with Lief's name, therefore helping readers remember who she was. It was also partly because I knew someone called Jasmine with a cloud of black hair long ago, and partly because the name had a very different look on the page. So it was Lief and Jasmine. What I usually tell children is that I think it is important in books, especially books that people are reading fast or maybe that are early readers, to have things on the page that look different, so people know instantly who you are

talking about. It is a mistake, for example, to have several characters called Jim, John, James, because they look similar on the page and you can become confused between them. It is like having everyone in a television show with long blonde hair. If you go out and get a cup of tea, you will forget who's who.

I've got Lief; short, sharp, streetwise. I've got Jasmine; more mysterious and of the forest. And then I've got Barda, the man I decided would be a sort of older and protective figure. That's a made-up name, but it's kind of a square name, which is what I wanted him to be. You can't muck around with it. It's got B and D in it and the syllables Bar-Da. It just stands straight on its feet to me, that name. I also wanted the names to remind you of the personality of the person concerned. That is what I always try and do. I liked the three; a triangle is always good. It gives you a bit of variety but not too much. If you've got to go through a long quest together, you've got three different kinds of talents. I could have just done it with Lief and Jasmine, but I thought it was stronger with the triangle.[10]

The concept of the maps evolved, as Emily explained to *Magpies*:

The shape of the kingdom remained exactly as it was when I began and had it pinned up on my noticeboard, but maps became more informative in the later Deltora books. The map that appears in the front of each of the eight books in the first Deltora Quest series is a very simple 'sketch' map showing the city of Del (the quest's

> starting point) and the seven dangerous places around the kingdom where it was believed the stolen gems were hidden. It also showed the sea to the east, south and west, and the Shadowlands border in the north. Progressively, the maps displayed the route taken by the heroes. I didn't attempt to show the borders of the seven Deltora tribes, though I knew where they were. Bearing in mind the small paperback size and paper quality, I wanted to keep the map very simple and uncluttered so that readers could focus on the main destinations, and so that the route would be clear.[11]

With the maps in place, then, Emily began to think the books should have some other illustration component to them. She considered that illustrations of action scenes might look too childish to her intended audience, but knew from her own children's experience, readers like the text to be broken up with visual elements and that such devices can help reluctant readers to make their way through a book from start to finish. She came to realise that this would give the books a whole other dimension that would chime with her intentions for the series.

> I was quite interested in the idea that this quest wouldn't all be solved by swords and kicking people in the head; I wanted my heroes to use their wits as well. It struck me that these two ideas were coming together really well, so I started making up anagrams and codes. I had a lot of fun doing the codes, maps, instructions and signposts. It all started from my

> looking for ways to make the text look interesting, which led me to start thinking of more and more puzzles and games.[12]

Integral to the stories are the monsters, which were of particular interest to *D:mag*. It's fascinating to know she takes as much care getting to know the characteristics and natures of her fantasy beasts as the human characters.

> I generally know the life cycle of all my animals. I have worked out whether they lay eggs or nest and what they eat. I mightn't necessarily put it in, but I say to kids if you're trying to invent a creature, don't just stop at thinking what it looks like, think about other things. It makes it much more interesting and it enables you to make a whole character.[13]

Emily was asked if she had a favourite monster. 'I thought the Glus was pretty ghastly. I mean, it isn't something that I'd like to have around the house but I do like the idea of an enormous creature that lives in a maze that it repairs.'

During the Auckland Writers and Readers Festival event, Emily expressed delight at discovering the NZ whetter. 'Imagine a whetter as big as this room.' She explained, a lot of the monsters are 'things I fear. I don't like insects much. I find them very scary, partly because they don't feel *anything*. I don't suppose lions and tigers feel a lot but I'm sure a praying mantis doesn't.'

Other creatures were based on 'ideas that I find personally scary. Like the Gluss. The idea of being pursued around this subterranean maze by this relentless slug-like creature that's just waiting till you get tired before it absorbs you. The other one was the sand beast in *The Shifting Sands*, which I had worked out in enormous detail.'

D:Mag were intrigued by the Fear in Series 2, a creation that Emily was especially pleased with …

> I had a very clear idea in my mind what that was like and what it would have been like being in that cabin. I'm very interested in the Vraal because it is a killing machine. Most of the others are natural beasts that you might find anywhere. The Vraal is different because it has been bred by the Shadow Lords to be an implacable and absolutely dauntless enemy.

It's fun to note that the creatures in the three Monty's Island books have their roots in reality too. Emily was lying in bed one morning when she heard the call-and-response of two unfamiliar birds in the bush outside her window. The Argue Birds were born. She wasn't afraid to put scary creatures in that young series – such as the Hairy Horrible, who could be even scarier for never being seen – because she relies on the common sense of the island's residents to know its patterns of behaviour and steer well clear to remove themselves from potential danger.

*

Having experienced the creative process from both sides, Emily knows well that if something is working, publishers and readers want more of it – which can be a double-edged sword.

> If you keep doing that, you'll kill the inspiration. So often when kids ask me 'Can't you write another Deltora book?', I'll respond with 'You know how you used to watch *The Simpsons* and how funny it was? How do you like the newest series?' They usually tell me it is no good. That's because the idea was finished and should have been left as it was. After a while, somehow or other, inspiration goes. The trouble with epic 'saving the world' kind of stories, is that you can't keep doing that. That is why you often see very disappointing sequels of movies that were great and should have been left alone. I feel I have told the Deltora story now, although I have been able to return to that world with the Star of Deltora series. When you have had something that has been phenomenally successful it is wonderful. But … I just think you have to say to yourself, 'How great, that really worked.[14]

Modesty aside, the immediate success of Deltora Quest surprised and delighted Emily. She told *The Mix*: 'After the second or third books were published, I started to get these badly written, badly spelt letters on grubby bits of paper and I thought, "I've done it! These are the kids I was hoping for."'

And there was more than the trace of a tear in her eye when she shared this story of a reader who wrote to say her mother – who had been a great fantasy lover – and was dying. The reader started taking in Deltora Quest titles to read aloud. Emily recounted, 'While we were there, she said there was no pain, no fear … it was wonderful. Things like that make me feel pretty good.[15]

8

An Australian Imagination

From the *stuff* in the NCACL archives, we can see Emily Rodda's significance in the Australian literary world in the 90s and 2000s and beyond. It's a contribution that has been recognised by several lifetime achievement awards, notably the Dromkeen Medal in 1995, awarded annually by the Courtney Oldmeadow Children's Literature Foundation, for those who have advanced children's literature in Australia and, in 2019, the Companion of the Order of Australia (AM) for services to literature.

Emily is seen as an ambassador for encouraging children to read for pleasure and for literacy attainment. Commenting on her receipt of her AM, she said …

> I feel as though my work as Emily Rodda has been the driving force and my general advocacy for children's reading. We are trying to prepare the readers of future generations. Australian kids are not reading as much as kids in other countries. With all the competition and electronic devices, books can give them something that nothing else can. They gain an ownership of the book that you don't get with anything else.[1]

Deltora Quest massively expanded her fan base not only in Australia but throughout the world. Deltora Quest's global success surprised its author. She had no expectation that it would cross cultural borders and sell overseas, although she acknowledges that a fantasy world translates very well to any country.

In Japan the series became a hot property and inspired several adaptations. There have been graphic novels, illustrated by noted Japanese manga artist, Makoto Niwano. An exclusive Nintendo DS game was licensed in Japan in 2007. Also in 2007, Genco created a 65-episode anime series. The first 52 episodes were based on the initial series with a further 13 new stories (which were not dubbed into English and therefore not part of the Cartoon Network's transmission of the series in 2010). There's been much talk of a Deltora Quest live-action movie or TV series based on the books, but at the time of writing, no contracts have been signed so nothing is in development. Japanese readers especially seemed to take to Rowan of Rin's particular brand of heroism. The Fairy Realm series was another hit in that country. Emily's Japanese publisher produced a sparkly range of brightly coloured bookmarks and a sweet pink card with a handwritten note from Emily, in English – 'Thank you for coming with Jessie and me on our journey through the realm. I hope you will always keep magic in your hearts' – with a winning author photo and the message printed below in Japanese.

Emily visited Japan at the invitation of the Australia-Japan Foundation in 2004 – the first time she addressed

an audience for whom English was not their first language. She gave a special address to sixth-grade students as part of the Author Visit Program, being the first overseas author to contribute to the programme. One account read, 'A vivacious Australian mum, Emily Rodda is one of the most popular authors (in the foreign literature category) in Japan.' Her fans were eager to ask questions about inspiration and imagination, and at the end of the day she was presented with a bunch of flowers and written responses to her books from appreciative fans.[2]

Back on her home ground, it was the CBCA wins that constantly put Emily on the literary map. Nobody has won six Book of the Year awards in a single category, ever. (Emily has also received five Honour Book prizes and numerous other shortlistings.)[3]

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Throughout the 1990s, as Emily published widely and prolifically for different age groups and in different genres, she achieved success across the board in terms of sales. In September 1994, *Australian Bookseller + Publisher* listed two Teen Power titles among the children's paperback top 10 – *The Disappearing TV Star* (at no 3) and *The Ghost of Raven Hill* (at no 8) – in a pleasingly, mostly Australian list of writers, including Catherine Jinks, Jonathan Harlen, Libby Hathorn and Morris Gleitzman.

In the children's paperback fiction category of the *Sydney Morning Herald* Top Sellers of the Year list in 1999 – pre-Deltora (04.12.99, sourced mostly from

independent children's booksellers), the first positions were taken by Harry Potter, followed by John Marsden's Tomorrow YA series with *Bob the Builder and the Elves* coming in at position 8 and *Rowan and the Zebak* at number 9.

Success Story: International rights sales of Australian-authored books 2008–2018', produced by the Australia Council for the Arts in October 2021, makes fascinating reading as it not only describes the success which Australian publishers have been documenting for years but also highlights challenges and obstacles to future growth. But the bottom line is positive:

> There has been an overall growth in absolute deals. The number of international rights deals completed in each year between 2008 and 2018 increased. Over half of all recorded deals were for children's books. Of the 9,315 rights deals contained within the sample, over half – 54% – involved titles targeted at younger readers: picture books (21%), middle grade (27%), teen and young adult (YA) (6%).

Although specific authors are not named, Emily's books must surely have contributed to these percentages. Australian children's literature – indeed, Australian literature – has long punched above its weight, in spite of the size of the population being so much smaller than the English-language publishing scenes in the UK and the USA. (In fact, because Australian offices had been established mostly to direct the imports of foreign books, it took the parent companies aback in the 50s and 60s to

see local publishing flourishing – one of the best-known manoeuvres was getting Britain's Puffin doyenne Kaye Webb to take a staggering 15,000 copies of the Practical Puffins series, the brainchild of maverick Australian publishers, Hilary McPhee and Diana Gribble.)[7]

Maverick is also a term that applies to Omnibus Books. The firm was established as an independent publishing house by Jane Covernton and Sue Williams in 1981. Their books had a distinct, sophisticated look in terms of employing white space and elegant typography, as well as being occasionally anarchic and anti-establishment. The immediate success of its publishing put financial pressure on the founders, who entered a publishing relationship with Penguin Books to print and distribute their titles, before later selling the business to Scholastic Australia. Jane and Sue stayed with Omnibus until 1997 when they left to form Working Title Press.

Omnibus was always run as a tight ship with all team members taking a hands-on approach. There were two key senior editors: Celia Jellett and Penny Matthews. Celia had begun her career doing work experience for Jane and Sue as an English Honours student in 1982, then learned her craft with the firm before leaving in 1987. The Rowan books were edited by Penny Matthews, who left in 1994 and subsequently joined Penguin to work on the Aussie Bites and Nibbles series. Celia returned in 1997.

Celia explained to me that, being a smaller, regional team, once the publisher had acquired the text, all the editorial work was done by the managing editor, including the structural edit, line edit, copy-edit and proofread, as well as checking the artwork matched the text, and

correcting the final typesetter's files. In a larger company these tasks would have been farmed out to colleagues, both in-house and freelance. I'm sure Emily relished the immersive approach to all stages of the process because they mirrored her own interests.

In 2016, Scholastic closed Omnibus Books' Adelaide office, resulting in the loss of five jobs – a move broadly condemned in the children's publishing world. Emily moved away from the Omnibus/Scholastic fold, returning to HarperCollins' imprint Angus & Robertson[8] and to her murder mystery publisher Allen & Unwin's internationally acclaimed children's list.

Emily Rodda was an incredibly important author for Scholastic Australia – and for the parent company in America, where she was a *New York Times* bestseller. (At that time, Australian sales of Emily Rodda's books were 3 million , the global figure exceeding 15 million.) Locally, she was billed as the 'Queen of Children's Fantasy' (and 'an important facilitator of children's literacy, getting kids reading, keeping kids interested in reading'.) When it came to selling books, they focused as much on the mass media as on the school sales. Schools marketing was a major focus, too, through Scholastic's clubs and fairs – their reach was unrivalled with 'brochures, posters and bookmarks, reaching a whopping 2.6 million primary school kids with an average frequency of at least five times.'

A bookmark declaring *The Golden Door* to be 'The biggest book of 2011' (with the chance to win a state-of-the-art iPad 2!) was widely circulated. Links to Deltora were firmly established, the trilogy being cited as a 'return' to that realm and 'Next generation Deltora Quest'.

When it came to selling-in Star of Deltora in 2015, Scholastic Australia seemed to hold nothing back: its glossily presented bespoke PR campaign focused on *Total Girl* ('the nation's leading girl mag aimed at ages 6-12') plus other magazines, targeted at both girls and boys; the women's magazine market; top-rating breakfast TV programmes.

There was digital content as well as traditional printed brochures and shelf-talkers, samplers and posters. Packets of Star of Deltora trading cards were produced with the opportunity of finding a golden ticket: 'rare foiled card or instant-win bonus'.

In January 2018, Emily Rodda ranked at 22 in Booktopia's annual list of Australia's favourite writers,[9] Slipping slightly to position 20 in 2017.

As early as 2004, she was being billed as BIGGER THAN HARRY POTTER with the Adelaide *Advertise*r's Samela Harris confidently saying that Emily Rodda's books were outselling J. K. Rowling's.[10]

These days, any comparison with J. K. Rowling might not be considered an instant blessing, and even in the early days, it was complicated. Journalist Jennifer Byrne picked up on this: 'When the final instalment [of Deltora Quest] was released last year, kids queued up to buy the first copies and crazy scenes ensued. It's not quite Harry Potter territory but it still earned Emily the cursed compliment of being "Australia's J. K. Rowling". Then again, when she made her name writing twisty-plotted adult mysteries she was known as "Australia's Agatha Christie."'[11]

The poor man's J. K. Rowling? Emily shrugged off any offence. 'I'm enough of a publisher to think that people take whatever they need because it sells,' she conceded. 'If you don't take yourself too seriously in this business it helps.'

There speaks a practical author. Such an Australian way of looking at life, wouldn't you say?

This brings me to a couple of questions that have been swimming around in my head as I've worked on this book.

First, could Emily have so persuasively headed up institutions as essentially indigenous as Angus & Robertson and *The Australian Women's Weekly* if she'd not been Australian? Is that too simplistic, like asking if the editor of a magazine targeted at women needs to identify as female? In none of the 'superwoman' profiles was her nationality an issue, but perhaps her achievement would have been viewed as less of a novelty in other countries.

On to the second question. Just how Australian *is* this writer's work? I've heard a lot of Australian authors and publishers despair at the rejection of their books by overseas publishers for being 'too Australian'. It's sobering to note that Emily only felt safe leaving full-time employment because of her overseas sales. The question of how Australian authors can afford to pursue their craft full-time, based on advances, royalties and lending rights, and perhaps government financial assistance, has long occupied the industry. Does being too Australian hinder success?

When we met, I asked Emily to what extent she thinks

of herself as an Australian writer. Within a beat, her gumnut earrings assertively jangling, she replied, 'I'm an Australian writer because I am Australian and so – like anybody who lives here – your whole ethos is in there. I take it so for granted.' She added, with bemusement: 'Somebody said to me once, "Why are you still here? Why aren't you in America? You could become so much better known." I thought, "No; being transplanted isn't going to work. I like it here."'

Emily adds Australian ingredients 'if the story demands it. If I'm writing high fantasy I don't use Australianisms but I will if I'm writing other things. I just don't feel it's absolutely necessary to be always declaring yourself and having a bandicoot come in.' But ultimately, 'I don't necessarily write about koalas but I would never think of myself as a member of any other country.'

Emily told the *Australian Bookseller + Publisher*: 'I like to write about a place I know very well – whether it be a fantasy world or a place where I've actually lived.' (Remember Emily's mantra from Chapter 6: 'To write something, you have to believe it. To invent a world, you have to live in it.') At the Auckland event in 2012, Emily talked about the inspiration for the setting of *Rowan of Rin* being Hobart, where she once spent several months. The idea of a city at the foot of a mountain remained with her long after her sojourn there.

In the third Birdie book, *The Makeover Murders*, Birdie is on assignment to Deepdene, aka Makeover Manor (no doubt, Emily was availing herself of *The Weekly*'s beauty and lifestyle content), set deep in bushland. She is on assignment for the ABC but her research is almost immediately interrupted by the murder of co-owner,

Margot Bell, a former model. Before her arrival on a stormy afternoon she is referred to, rather dismissively, as 'that ABC woman'. When she turns up, bedraggled, having slipped into a fervent creek after abandoning her old banger of a car, she presents as something out of an Emily Rodda fantasy:

> It was small, and black, with huge, blinking eyes that stared blindly out through tangled hair. It was streaming with water. Steam rose from its noxious garments in a dank-smelling cloud. Weed and grass clung to its legs and arms. It squelched as it moved. It showed its chattering teeth in what might have been a snarl, a smile, or just an involuntary spasm.
>
> When the shock and disbelief clear, Birdie volunteers: 'G'day … The creature from the Black Lagoon at your service.'

There's a vein of black humour that runs through much Australian crime fiction and the Birdie books are no exception.

Nor is Emily's most recent crime novel, *Love, Honour and O'Brien*, a quirky stand-alone comic murder mystery. Once again, the Blue Mountains provided the setting – this time, a very specific aspect of mountains life. 'I had this idea of a detective teaming up with a clairvoyant,' Emily explained. 'Holly's fiancé has disappeared with all her money and she falls into this mystery which has to be solved.'[12] But Emily didn't choose the setting just 'because I felt at home writing about the area' as she explained in an interview at the time. She was interested

in the myriad reasons that draw people to live in such a place, where there's a strong sense of community, because the population is relatively small, but still 'room to be unselfconsciously eccentric, if you want to'.

> I really value eccentric characters in real life, and loved writing about the eccentrics in the book, but in fact I'd have to say that my favourite character is actually the one who seems the most ordinary – Holly Love, my beleaguered heroine. Like most people, Holly's in fact not nearly as 'normal' as she seems, or as she thinks she is. I very much enjoyed getting to know her.[13]

There's a peril in the intimacy fostered by village life which intrigued Emily just as much: 'If you complain to a friend in a cafe about the plumber who didn't turn up, you're just as likely to be sitting next to the plumber's wife, who teaches your child in school.' The potential for taking sides, spreading rumours and tripping on misunderstandings is limitless, and rich fodder for a full-length murder mystery.

I think, on the whole, Australianness can be challenging to find in Emily's books. I'm not sure how exceptional this is amongst the baby boomer writers of her generation who emerged in the 1980s. The defensive, post-colonial battler attitudes in all Robin Klein's books are identifiably Australian. The politics in books by James Moloney, Nadia Wheatley and Libby Gleeson are too. Libby Hathorn's sense of place, shared with Jackie French and Roger Vaughan Carr and David Metzenthen, is distinctly

local. English-born Gillian Rubinstein has pulses of Aussie-ness in certain characters and scenarios but they can border, deliberately I think, on caricature. The roots of several of her books are in Britain.

Perhaps it's different for fantasy writers. Victor Kelleher left England at 15, but so many of his books are deeply rooted in Europe. His Australian books tend to be urban, set in Sydney where he lived for many years.

What of Emily Rodda? Her first two published books are tales of urban magical realism. Rereading them, I noticed details that reminded me of *my* Sydney in the 1980s. But thinking about it, the shopping malls and windswept streets could be in America. I admitted to struggling to recognise much that was Australian in Deltora Quest, perhaps because I've lived away for so many years. However, the director and the designer of the Japanese anime had no trouble recognising the 'other' in the books, so much so that they asked Emily for specific references and actually travelled from Japan to see them in real life.

'I don't mind if people don't recognise it but it's just interesting that the Japanese did,' she said. She pointed out, too, that she has travelled – she's been to Egypt and seen rippling cascades that could easily have gone on to inspire the Shifting Sands.

The Australianness of *His Name Was Walter* crept up on me as I reread it, perhaps because, by then, I had been living outside Australia, in the UK, for 20 years. I think the book is Emily Rodda's masterpiece – so far – and on publication it was instantly lauded. Not only was it

crowned CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers, but it also won the Prime Minister's Literary Award. Its stunning design and production values garnered an Australian Book Design Award (Children's Fiction Book) and a clutch of shortlistings.

One of the threads at the end is described as 'a land scam and a murder' which could be the constituents of an adult Aussie noir murder story. The teacher and students' would-be rescuer is the tow-truck driver whose laconic, amused drawl is distinctly Australian. The nearby vineyards have a characteristically Australian feel. And so is Colin's stoic attitude to the potential inconvenience of being holed up in Grolsten during the storm. 'What can't be cured must be endured,' as his grandfather said in response to too much or too little rain and other challenges of rural life.

This book is intersectional in terms of crossing genres, and draws culturally from stories from both hemispheres. In her CBCA award acceptance speech, Emily said, 'It combines my three great loves – fantasy, magical reality, and mystery. And moving in and out of the tale of Walter's life are reflections of my husband Bob's life as an orphan boy long ago.' It's a story about stories, a book that reminds you of other stories you've read and loved. This quality delighted editor Celia Jellett, who had been a big fan of Philippa Pearce's 1958 classic, *Tom's Midnight Garden*. Celia told me that Pearce's book 'made me aware of the past for the first time', and she's loved timeslips stories ever since (like the BBC TV series *Ghosts*). 'So, Walter struck a chord there,' Celia told me.

Once inside the house at Grolsten, the children find Walter's book and begin to read. We don't yet know how old the book is (though it retains a curiously fresh scent). It could be nineteenth-century Australia when the influences of British colonialism were still potent. After all, the author quotes the English novelist L.P. Hartley. 'The past is another country.' The city in Walter's story is full of chimneys and harsh prisons, which could suggest we're somewhere like Manchester, which burgeoned at the height of the Industrial Revolution. Walter's story was inspired by Bob Ryan's own childhood in England.

We see a sparrow. Roses. And especially bees: 'a wizened old bee wearing an apron and a starched white veil standing in the doorway of a giant beehive. The bee was looking down at a tiny human baby lying on the doorstep, wrapped in a black shawl patterned with red roses.' The baby, of course, is Walter.

This is a high fantasy world of talking, working animals – mice, bats and hawks quickly join the menagerie, then ducks and a grey-and-black-striped cat. There's a pig. But there are mythical creatures, too, like griffins. We're over 100 pages in before we meet a wombat and a possum and eventually a cockatoo. Rosemary, mint and thyme scent the air, and the trees are willows, which might make you think of Kenneth Grahame's stories of Toad and Badger but maybe set near a brackish river or a creek that is closer to the reader's comfort zone. (Later, when this is established as a very Australian story, we discover that the willows are scorned for their greedy consumption of precious water resources.)

Walter's is a story of a brutal war 'across the sea' – the King's Great War. The First World War (1914–18) is often called the Great War and the devastating loss of life which seemed to surprise so many is echoed in this story. At the end of the book, when reality and fiction are untangled, Grace insists that 'If the book's true, Walter must have lived hundreds of years ago! When people died of plague, and there was a King'. Teacher Mrs Fiori insists that Walter's birth was at the end of the First World War and his death soon after the end of the Second World War. 'All the clues to the time are in the book, truly.' On the next page, discovering that Walter's story took place more recently, 'It made everything closer, more real, more confronting.'

So maybe L.P. Hartley's claim isn't true. 'Those days are dead and gone,' says Prudence Bail (aka Bailey) in *The Shop at Hoopers Bend*, but ironically, despite being one of the older characters in the book, her story feels most modern. Bailey has been 'let go' from her employer after nearly 30 years. 'Old-timers like her didn't fit the company's new, "dynamic" image'. She has fond memories of a handful of childhood visits to the shop at Hoopers Bend, owned by Uncle Frank and left to her in his will when he died seven years ago. Perhaps the secret is not to be overly nostalgic; to not expect the past to matter so much. Then it will.

9

Lost Children

Of all the tales I've read or reread in my preparation for this book, the one I keep thinking about is 'Zelda'. It's a short story (Emily's only short story for younger readers that I know of), written for *Dream Time*, published in 1989, an anthology commissioned by the CBCA to celebrate its awards. Writers who had won or been shortlisted for the awards were eligible to submit stories interpreting the words 'Dream Time', which was the Children's Book Week slogan that year. Emily's was one of sixteen stories accepted.

'Zelda' was inspired by those Abbotsleigh days both Meredith and Emily have described. 'The girls in the story are imaginary, but the way they talk to each other, and the feeling of the school, is as I remember it,' Emily revealed in *The 2nd Authors and Illustrators Scrapbook*.

'Zelda' is narrated by Jess who tries to make sense of her friendship with the strange, enigmatic classmate. 'I couldn't really say what it was that made Zelda the odd kid out. But that's what she was. From our first day in Year Seven, that's what she was.' Further: 'You didn't get any feeling about her at all, really … She was just separate, and different, and you just wouldn't know what she was feeling or thinking about.'

On the day of days that Jess remembers so vividly, the class is instructed to '[write] a description of ourselves – not in the first person, but as though someone else was writing it.' When Jess intercepts the cool girls ridiculing Zelda's admittedly exotic account, something in her snaps. Suddenly it was like Zelda wasn't the odd kid out at all, but part of me … and all the other people in the world who weren't cool, and cruel, and fearless.' She concludes the story:

> It seems to me that growing up is a bit like waking up, bit by bit. You go along, dreaming, thinking you're awake and that you understand how things are, and you're seeing things clearly. And then something happens … and you blink, and suddenly the world's more in focus than it was before, and you realise you haven't been properly awake at all. That day, defending Zelda, was one of my 'waking up' times.

Zelda leaves the school the following year, unaware of Jess's actions, and no closer to her classmates than she was at the start. But Jess still thinks of her (and still lives with the scorn of the cool girls who she dared to confront).

It occurs to me that Emily's amateur detective, Verity Birdwood, is a version of Zelda who *didn't* leave her best friend Kate's life. Birdie is chilled by the notion of 'Ghost children' – the dead but also the vestiges of innocence that remain even in the most corrupted or barren hearts. I think Kate's constancy and lack of drama is essential

to their friendship. Despite the passing of years, their friendship hasn't evolved. There's not much more Kate can learn from Birdie because she got the measure of her back in adolescence.

Grim Pickings is our introduction to Birdie and Kate. In this novel, Kate, her husband Jeremy and their seven-year-old daughter, Zoe, have arrived for the annual apple gathering at the Tender family house in the Blue Mountains. Jeremy has been a friend of Chris Tender since they were schoolboys; just as Kate and Birdie have been friends since childhood.

Birdie is an anomaly. 'Funny sort of person to find in a group like this,' thinks one police officer, while another, Dan Toby (who knows Birdie from a previous case) actually says, 'You're the only outsider here.' With her quizzical golden eyes, her mass of hair, and big, thick-lensed glasses she looks 'like a little furry animal'. One time, Birdie is described as 'a creature' and a word Kate and Jeremy both use is 'inhuman'. Another description, from *Grim Pickings*, suggests she is somehow mechanical:

> Her wiry little figure, sitting forward in her chair, seemed filled with an awful energy. You could feel the fear and tension in the room as her voice went on and on, the voice of a relentlessly logical, untiring machine.

It's significant, I think, that while she is sometimes described as a machine or a monster, one thing she is never considered is 'child-like'.

Kate recognises Birdie's capacity for tenderness,

as when her daughter Zoe's life is endangered in the climax of *Grim Pickings*. Another character, herself an interloper, recognises: 'Something about this woman was intensely reassuring.' She was so 'honest. No gush or pretence about her, so you didn't feel you had to gush or pretend.' But even Kate is capable of dehumanising Birdie, as in this passage from *Murder by the Book*, Birdie's second outing:

> She was Kate's oldest friend, but even at school she'd had little understanding of, and no patience with, ordinary human inconsistency … She took Birdie for granted most of the time. She was just Birdie, as she'd always been. Small, scruffy, irritable and irritating, sardonic, coldly logical, and quite, quite self-sufficient. Birdie was the only person she knew who didn't seem to need anyone. She seemed to Kate, for that reason, invulnerable…
>
> It was strange to have such a friend, a friend you never touched, or comforted. A friend who'd seen you cry, and heard your most secret fears and doubts, but who'd never shed tears of her own, or confided. A friend you loved, but who never showed affection to you except, Kate supposed, by staying around.

So where did Verity Birdwood come from? In *Murder by the Book*, set in the world of publishing, we gain some insight into Birdie's private life:

> The house was tiny, must only be one bedroom. A single-storey terrace crowded up to its neighbours, hidden from the narrow street by a mass of overhanging shrubs and small trees that clustered behind its miniature front fence. You'd think with her father's money she'd do herself better for than this. It's as if she doesn't live here, despite the opulent furnishings and fixtures.

'Her father's money' is the first reference to Birdie's family but we learn a lot more in book four, *Stranglehold*, which reunites her with the Tullys, a family she knew as a small child. Birdie grew up in an affluent neighbourhood and hers was the only family with children – one child, herself. (Unsurprisingly, Birdie didn't much like herself as a child – she describes herself in the final book, *Lamb to the Slaughter*, as 'Conceited. A know-all. Into everything. A pain in the arse.') With connections to the media, the Birdwoods and Tullys were friendly colleagues. Now the patriarch, Max, is turning 70 and hosting a big reunion; it's a party Birdie isn't looking forward to:

> Although they'd spent so much time together as children, while their parents socialised, they had nothing whatever in common. Birdie hadn't really considered that then. When you're a child you just go along with things … She hadn't much enjoyed Wendy and Douglas's company at five, still less ten. At 15 she was unsentimental enough to acknowledge the fact and take appropriate avoiding action.

Here's the rub: by age 14, Birdie's childhood had ended. The episode is narrated in the short story 'Forbidden Fruit', published in the collection *Death in Store* (1991). She is newly motherless – Jane Birdwood died 'tragically young' in a car accident (like Quil's parents) – and fiercely loyal to her father; a loyalty which intensifies in the story. Every Christmas Eve, the local residents meet at a neighbour's house for drinks, each household contributing a different dish. This year, the hosts are Jonathon and Peaches Macguire. A stable marriage, until Peaches finally succumbs to the attentions of local pâtissier William who is obsessed with her.

Of all the contributions, William's fruit tree confection – a work of art and fantasy – is the showpiece. For the murderer it's the perfect weapon but nobody reckons on teenage Birdie's clumsiness in knocking bespoke pieces intended for certain guests off the branches and hastily rearranging the rest to look normal. As a result, Jonathon dies.

The obvious solution is that William poisoned Jonathon so he could be with Peaches. But Birdie doesn't like 'pat' answers (a word she uses often in the series). She explained her suspicions to her father, and then …

> 'Dad called the cops. Most parents would have just told me to run away and play and stop thinking about nasty things. But he didn't … And the cops listened too. Maybe it had seemed too pat for them, as well.'

Perhaps Emily's parallel career as a crime writer –

which began just two books into her life as a children's writer – was inevitable. If that genre move seems like a drastic departure, bear in mind that if children's authors write for adults it seems crime fiction is their genre of choice. Perhaps it's unsurprising; crime fiction and children's books both rely on strong plotting. In Australia, Pamela Freeman and Garry Disher operate in both fields, like Emily. British writer Jacqueline Wilson started with crime fiction in the 1970s before moving on to children's books in the 80s. Among the most prominent writers of the generation before Wilson, Peter Dickinson, Joan Aiken, Jill Paton Walsh and Nina Bawden all achieved success in both genres.

Now I can tell you that the author I mentioned in the 'Questing' chapter at the start of this book, who spoke of her books as a 'coded biography', was Nina Bawden. From the 1950s until the early 2000s, she was a prolific writer of novels for adults and children as well as being engaged in the British literary world as a reviewer, prize judge and much-admired advocate for all things story related. *Story* was her thing. She had another public life as a magistrate, encountering frequently the best and worst of humanity (ultimately finding the requirement to judge repugnant). Despite her self-confessed passion for parties and travel in perilous locations, she'd dealt privately and publicly with profound grief and loss.

I'm not implying Nina is Emily from the generation before and the other side of the world. (Though I'd happily suggest Emily Rodda is a next generation Ruth Park.) Nina never wrote high fantasy but after rereading

the Emily Rodda stories I now know what *I* like about fantasy. It's not escapism, though that's what works for other people, I know, and I celebrate that. People talk about – dismiss? – murder mysteries as escapist fiction, too, but much of what I know about human nature has come from Ruth Rendell. It's stark recognition, in often bleak circumstances, in settings rooted in hardship as opposed to opportunity, that brutally illuminates the most important life lessons.

In 1994, Nina Bawden published a wonderful children's novel, *The Real Plato Jones*, and *In My Own Time* which was 'almost an autobiography', and it's in the latter book you can read her thoughts on her career.)[1] Emily Rodda has said 'my kids' books are really all mysterious because they all have a surprise ending and my murder mysteries are not the harsh, realistic kind.'[2] When asked, 'How different is the process of writing for children and adults?' Emily replied, 'Not different at all. You do moderate your language to a certain extent but you do that automatically in life. You're telling a story and you have an idea who you're telling it to. Your material tells you what sort of language to use.'[3]

Back in the 1980s, when she was still at Angus & Robertson, Emily and her circle of friends adored reading golden-age-style murder mysteries from the 30s and 40s, by writers such as Ngaio Marsh, Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham. However …

> At the time there was masses of Patricia Highsmith and thrillers, and we had to keep going back to second-

> hand bookshops to try to find the kind of stories we really liked. I had been vaguely thinking about doing a PhD on why women in particular loved these kinds of books and why women wrote them. I was thinking I could get Stephen Knight to supervise … But then, I thought, it would be more fun and I'd learn just as much by trying to write one.[4]

So that's how *Grim Picking*s came to be written. When I reread the novel, there were two lines that resonated above all others. They come at the end of the story, once all the clues have been delivered, all the action played out, except for the apprehension of the killer: 'The other theme was old things – old houses, full of old things and old memories, old people, people who dealt in old things – bought them, sold them, wrote books about them, played with them.'

How easily could this belong in a story published under the Rodda name? The stories set in Hoopers Bend or Grolsten, sure; perhaps Bungawitta, too. Or maybe we're reminded of Eliza Vanda and her button box, or the carousel in *The Best-Kept Secret*, the clock in *Finders Keepers*, or Aunt Bethany's house in the Rondo trilogy.

What about the *first* theme? Here's Birdie in the preceding paragraph: 'I said earlier … that if I'd been asked to name a theme that's come up repeatedly over the last few days, it would have to be mothers and children.' Again, we could apply that to the children's titles. Think of how Walter's quest began, or Quil's new insight into her late mother, or Milly's anxiety as she waits for her

stepmother Julie and baby Flora to return from hospital, just at the time Eliza Vanda arrives at Tidgy Bay. Think of Sam and Mum in *Something Special* – Mum's in charge of the second-hand clothes stall at the school fete, which enables Sam to encounter the Specials.

A fun fact is that Kate Rowe's nickname was Sam, which was what Emily called her main character (Sam Delaney). Delaney is the surname of Kate, Birdie's oldest (perhaps only?) friend. So while we don't know for sure if there's much of book editor and mother Emily Rodda in book editor and mother Kate Delaney, we know there's definitely something of her in Sam's mum, Lizzie Delaney, because Emily also organised a used-clothes stall at Kate's school.

I think Emily Rodda's works of magical reality and the Verity Birdwood novels are cut from the same cloth. *The Shop at Hoopers Bend* is rife with crime – but still it's strange to think it has more in common with Birdie's stories than with the Teen Power Inc. detective series, set very much in the real, logical world of the mid-90s (and long before the current vogue for teen detectives). Crime abounds, though, in the kids' books. There's a parable at the heart of *His Name was Walter*, as anagrams untwist and parallels are drawn. There's also an overt summary of the entire plot: CRAZED RETURNED SOLDIER IN KIDNAP ATTEMPT. It reads like sensationalist true-crime clickbait but is in fact a headline from a newspaper of 60 years earlier, which the children find in the museum. Lies are at the core of any crime story and Quil has to lie about her whereabouts in order to explore

Hoopers Bend, this special place to which she feels such a connection. Her lies catch up with her inevitably. First, thanks to the coincidence of a schoolteacher passing through en route to a bushwalking holiday. Then the surely non-coincidental arrival of the police which prompts Quil to flee, only to finally return, to find Bailey worried sick about her absence and, worse, the shop on fire …

It must be arson – and there's arson at the climax of *Grim Pickings* – but this isn't the only crime perpetrated in the story (not counting Quil's lies). For the unassuming Mrs Eva Dove – an alias for Evelyn Manifold or Eva Murch – is far from the gentle old lady she appears, who needs to sell her furniture to raise funds to pay for her dog's operation. She and her taciturn accomplice, Kirilee (posing as her daughter), are well known to the local estate agent and police for house sitting and selling on the owner's goods. We know something isn't right when Quil finds among her stock a cache of hand-painted mugs from Hoopers Bend Gallery, one of which started her journey in the first place.

There's a family feud, just as there is in *Grim Pickings*. Bailey's absence from Hoopers Bend is due to a falling-out between her mother and Uncle Frank. Bailey's mother 'thought Hoopers Bend was a backwater, full of people who weren't "our sort" … People who were a different colour, or had a different religion or accent. Not to mention people who weren't terrified of putting a foot out of place because of what the neighbours might say.' People like the Aboriginal Twelvetrees family and the Janiks from

Eastern Europe. Sadly, the locals misunderstand Bailey and attribute her parents' views to her. And she is resented by locals for a debt she knows nothing about. Added to this is a terrible revelation concerning letters that have been suppressed, and a hidden will that could right the wrongs of the past.

The police are involved in the story, of course, but when it's suggested they will ensure justice prevails, Bailey is dismissive. 'Oh, yes? And pigs might fly!' – a rather less whimsical use of the phrase than in Emily Rodda's second book for children.

In *Stranglehold*, Birdie's fourth mystery (and perhaps my favourite of the series), any of the assembled cast of children and former wives or partners could be responsible for murder. Unlike in *Grim Pickings*, where Birdie is the clear outsider, in *Stranglehold* she has this reluctant attachment to the Tullys that she needs to interrogate with her rational powers of deduction:

> Max, Isa, Wendy, Berwyn, Douglas … all possible, all impossible … not strangers, pieces on a chess board to be moved around at will. Real people, familiars of her childhood, small parts of herself, all of them, and for that very reason her mind failed to sense in any one of them the element of danger a stranger could rouse. Yet one of them was dangerous.

Ultimately, the story isn't so much about the suspect or the victims but Max Tully, whose biography is an orphan

story. (Emily's oeuvre is awash with orphans.) Although a self-made man, he never left his childhood behind, as evidenced by his creation of his Edenic home, 'Three Wishes'. He may trivialise its fairy-tale connotations, but everyone can see the lushness, the extravagance, is the result of wish fulfilment resulting from an earlier sense of deprivation.

Birdie thinks Max's past is 'pretty well documented. Everyone knows about Max's childhood.' To which Angus Birdwood, wise and loving and deeply concerned about his daughter's immersion in the Tullys' messy entanglements, says, 'Everyone knows what he tells them about his childhood. It's one of his ploys to talk about it. Everyone knows he was poor, that his mother struggled to keep him. But have you ever heard him talk about his father?

The story of Max's hatred for his father, a violent drunk, who died in a brawl (his mother's own life ended just one year later), and the corrosive grief he has felt ever since, which eats at him despite vowing never to speak of the man, strikes a chord with Birdie herself.

Angus Birdwood loved his wife unambiguously and understood who she was. He says part of him died when she did but he's gone on, seemingly able to deal with his own grief, secure in his knowledge. Now in her thirties, Birdie realises that she never had that opportunity:

> She never cried. Never. Her chest ached. She felt as though a door to a dark little room in her heart was being prised open. She fought the feeling … [Her

> father] thought she'd come to terms with all this long ago. But she was still a child when Jane Birdwood died. She thought like a child. She had a child's strange logic. She dealt in images and imaginings. And she'd never gone beyond that, where her mother was concerned.

Birdie acknowledges that as Max 'still carried inside him the child he had once been', so does she. It doesn't stop her from ploughing headlong into the final act of the mystery, imperilling herself, but I think it spells the end of this post-14 segment of her life.

Birdie's swansong, *Lamb to The Slaughter,* is a lament for lost childhood. There's plenty of hostility and tension, good characters and bad, including a former child criminal. Lily Danger, 'bad news ever since she come here', who absconds with Birdie's car, is the alias of Leanne Dee who at the age of 13, murdered an old woman for her money. I like ghoulish youngster Jason who pleads, 'Aw, Mum. I can't go to school today. Me uncle's been murdered, hasn't he?' Birdie likes him too – but the terrible events in a desolate country town expose a trajectory of sadness that has its roots in childhood.

> It was good, when we were little kids …' Rosalie Lamb tells Birdie. 'You mightn't believe it, to look at us now, but it was good […] We'd play, and eat, and sleep … We'd climb trees, make cubbies, eat apples down by the creek […] That's all we did. That's all we thought about. We never thought about getting old, or dying, or having children of our own, or anything like that.

> We never thought where the money came from. We just … lived each day as it came.

Rosalie is one of Annie Lamb's nine children – who include Trevor, recently released from gaol after being convicted of murdering his wife, and who quickly ends up dead himself. Trevor may have blighted the family's reputation (if Annie's feckless husband hadn't already done so) but she is haunted by the children she lost.

> Her voice was flat now, and her face was grim. She looked very tired and worn […] She sat there at the head of her depleted table and looked vacantly into the fluid in the mug. Not drinking yet. Just staring. Thinking, perhaps, of Trevor. Or of Keith. Or maybe of Milton. Or of the others – Johnny, Bridget, Cecelia, Mickey, Brett … all gone. So many lost children, thought Birdie, watching the bent head. How must that feel?

In the children's books, loss of oneself is the worst thing that can happen to a protagonist. In *The Best-Kept Secret*, Jo worries about being stuck in the future, just as Rachel in *Pigs Might Fly* fears being unable to leave the land governed by the UEF (and perhaps you'll remember the old couple, the Beddoes, longing for the return of their niece who vanished 20 years ago?); and Patrick's life becomes dominated by timekeeping to ensure he's always on the right side of the Barrier when it closes. 'Better to lose your house than to lose yourself,' asserts Marmalade, the ginger cat, darkly, in *The Battle for Rondo.*

Several times, *The Glimme*'s hero Finn fears his part of the quest is over, and all he's known and loved is lost for good. It's ironic because when he began he was certain of how little he had to lose: 'So what am I missing? Finn asked himself savagely. A grandfather who despises me? Master Ricks, who picks on me? Having to hide whenever I want to draw what I like?'

Time and again, these young characters face high stakes peril. Often the adults in their lives are unable to help them – perhaps they don't even know what's going on. But I was pleased to discover a touching line in *The Timekeeper* that illustrates that they do, of course, care. When Max instructs Patrick to cross the Barrier to rectify the problem with the clock on Patrick side, Estelle, the former babysitter, is outraged: 'But how could you get the *child* involved!'

If we read enough Emily Rodda stories, we are reliably reassured that order will be restored. This is also true of a classic crime novel. But whereas murder mysteries are about the kind of loss that can never be reversed – the taking of a life – in the children's books, the characters are *always* returned home, and *even better*, equipped with new skills to help negotiate the changes going on in their domestic lives.

Perhaps the loss of innocence and childhood freedom, as adulthood approaches, underlies all books written for young people. It's inevitable (if you believe in inevitabilities). In that case, what makes the canon of Emily's work so remarkable, which I think it is?

I would describe it as a kind of grace, offered to *all* characters, whether they appear in a work of realism or fantasy, aimed at a grown-up audience or readers in the thick of childhood experience. Certainly, the fact that the Verity Birdwood crime novels – necessarily laden with deplorable events – leave the reader feeling far from deflated is a gift that can only be bestowed by someone who places great value on writing books for children.

10

Deltora Diary

After the notebooks, here is my next favourite discovery in the NCACL archives. In one of the folders in the dove-grey boxes was a fax from Emily to the late Sandy Campbell, who was Scholastic Australia's dynamic publicity director (as well as being a committee member of the NSW branch of the CBCA). She was behind the publicity and marketing push to launch Teen Power Inc. in 1994. Sandy asked Emily to contribute to 'Classroom Clips', one of the key marketing resources to support Scholastic's clubs and fairs. The idea was to supply prompts for class discussions on promoted titles under general themes such as 'Personal Development', 'Social Studies', 'Drama' and 'Language'.

Emily offered a selection of ideas based on the first book in the series, *The Ghost of Raven Hill*. Here are some of the prompts she suggested …

- Discuss groups and gangs. How do they form?
- Is it good to be a member of a group?
- Do you think Liz's mother is overprotective?
- Can you imagine being old? What would your friends be like at eighty? What would your strongest childhood memories be?

- Discuss qualities and talents. Does everyone have a least one talent? What are your talents?
- Discuss competition between rival businesses, clubs, etc. What's good about competition? What's bad about it?
- Discuss advertising. Under what circumstances is advertising a good thing, or a bad thing, for the community?
- Discuss the phrase 'The pen is mightier than the sword'.
- Elmo is called after his father and grandfather. Why do families do this? Is it a good idea?
- Are wild places like the Glen important for city children? If so, why? And are they important for adults, too?
- If you were very rich and had no relatives, what would you put in your will? What would you put in your will now, if you had one?
- Discuss how newspapers and magazines attract buyers. Discuss headlines and covers.
- How important is money to happiness? Discuss the ways that different people make and spend money.

These considerations are germane to *The Ghost of Raven Hill*, but any reader of an Emily Rodda story – or Verity Birdwood mystery, for that matter – will recognise more than one preoccupation at the core of the tale. All evidence, I think, that whatever Emily is writing, she is a contemporary novelist exploring the timelessness of human enterprise and vulnerability.

They're germane to Deltora Quest too. Although simply constructed, the books are rich in ideas. Emily herself described the series as 'a complicated tale not just of adventure and magic but of the importance of history, and of spies, intolerance, propaganda and political manipulation'.[1] I've tried not to divulge too much about the plots of Emily's stories, but as I reread the first series of Deltora Quest from start to finish I paused to remember that for so many readers, boys especially, these will be the first stories they'll have chosen to read independently – and will keep reading until the end. By the time you close the covers of Book 8, you'll have encountered these themes and others. In addition, you'll have become acquainted with many of the essential tropes and techniques of storytelling. You'll be equipped to read longer and more complex books. You'll be equipped, perhaps, to write your own stories.

As I read, I made notes on what struck me as the greatest gifts in these stories. I think this exemplifies Emily's huge achievement as a storyteller who builds readers for life.

Perhaps the first unusual thing about Book 1, *The Forests of Silence*, is that we don't immediately meet the heroes named on the back cover: Lief, Jasmine and Barda. There's no prologue or introduction – we're *in* the story. But whose story?

We meet Jarred, who is the childhood companion of the newly crowned king Endon. In fact, when the old king dies they are each other's only ally and confidant.

Jarred has begun to doubt the wisdom of the way the kingdom is currently run and is fearful. Then he reads the small blue book about the Belt of Deltora and discovers a much bigger history than he's ever known.

The book contains the story of Adin, a blacksmith (like Jarred himself, and his own father), whose dreams compel him to fashion a belt to unite the seven tribes of Del, and so he becomes the first King of Del. As the generations follow, however, the belt is worn less often and the safety of the kingdom relies upon bureaucracy over magic, fear over courage, as the palace must be fortified and isolated to keep enemies at bay.

The book makes much sense to Jarred but when he shares his views with others, urging them to abandon the Rule and return to magic, he's considered a traitor and has to flee for his life. Once outside the fortress, he quickly realises that the 'new' ways fall far short of unifying the lands against evil and that, without royal privilege, life is desolate and risky. There is much 'hunger, illness and struggle', the citizens ignored by the king and left to subsist as best they can.

Seven years pass. Another hallmark of Emily's stories is the way they both focus on minute-by-minute action and also journey across tracts of time that are often as long as childhood itself. The years turn in *The Golden Door*, for example, each one bringing the return of the dangerous creatures, the Skimmers. People die. Rye, that story's hero across the trilogy, is a true prisoner of time; and time is unkind to him, his mother and the walled city of Weld.

*

The intervals between episodes of Deltora Quest vary, depending on terrain and distance, compounded by the toll of the struggle to survive. Book 2, *The Lake of Tears*, begins: 'The dark terrors of the Forest of Silence were far behind them …' So we know some time has passed since the end of the first episode. (Time can feel distorted too. As they begin the quest for the fifth gem, much later in the series, their destination, Dread Mountain, is weeks away but in marking the border with the Shadowlands it seems uncomfortably close.)

In desperation, Jarred sets off for the palace but it seems impenetrable, his old life lost. But Endon hasn't forgotten his childhood friend. He's left a puzzle – our first puzzle – that will lead Jarred inside the palace and back to his friend. Both young men know the time has come to abandon the Rules and return to magic. It's time to reclaim the Belt of Deltora – but they've acted too late. The Belt's guards have been slain, its glass cabinet smashed, the Belt and its seven gems stolen.

Only if the gems are found and the Belt restored to its former glory can the Shadow Lord be repelled. But not yet – for the Shadow Lord's invasion has begun and his control of Del is inevitable. They must wait until an heir is born; it is the heir who will embark on the quest.

Waiting. When you're a child there's no greater trial than being forced to wait, longing for something to occur. How can we conceive of the patience of the people of Del who endure sixteen years of 'darkness and terror' at the hands of the Shadow Lord?

Time does move on, and the story with it. Jarred has

married Anna, the friendly blacksmith's daughter, and they have a sixteen-year-old son called Lief, who shoulders the burden of responsibility at the forge because Jarred is incapacitated due to an accident that occurred during the time of darkness. But it's time for Lief to embark on the quest that is his destiny, the quest that spans generations. How often in Emily Rodda's stories are we asked to reflect on forebears, inheritances and inherited characteristics?

Maybe it has something to do with a theory Emily proposed in a *Canberra Times* article about what life was like for people after the age of 50: 'My theory of getting older is that you become more like you always were, it makes older people more eccentric and more interesting. I've noticed that with very old ladies what they are is exactly what they always were but more so.'[2]

Emily has noticed changes in herself, too. While her willingness to believe in what others might scorn abides, she has described a shift in how she responds to the world around her. In 2019, she wrote about the Blue Mountains for *The Sydney Morning Herald,* in an 'ode to spring' that was imbued with more than a touch of autumnal melancholy:

> Upper Blue Mountains winters are cold and seem to last a month too long. So when the air warms the 'four o'clock chill' no longer comes down like a shutter, closing off the afternoon, and trees and flowers burst into extravagant life. It's a joy.
>
> Women at the supermarket stop talking about moving

to Queensland. Sydney people come up to see the lavishly blooming open gardens. Tourists take selfies under the pink flounces of the Leura cherry trees. Sulphur-crested cockatoos bob on outdoor café tables, posing for pictures, eyeing muffins. And in our secluded valley I feel the sap rising and a thrilling sense of new beginnings.

It's not just the climate. It's also because I'm older – less exuberantly optimistic, but more susceptible to miracles.

I get the urge to tidy the house – sweep the front verandah, clear away those piles of things ageing on horizontal surfaces. Then I get the urge to buy new clothes. It doesn't take long to discover that this year everything's grey and purple, as if Victorian half-mourning has suddenly become all the rage. Or everything's in shades of brown, as if everyone wants to match their coffee of choice.

Or everything features huge florals that make me look like a deck chair cushion. Not that it matters, because the spring clothes came in ages ago, while I was still in winter mode, and there's nothing left in my size.

So I forget it. And I watch the crab apple trees at our front gate.

Those crab apples were waist-high when I planted

them. Now their canopies meet way over our heads. They've been traceries of sticks for months. If you'd never seen a deciduous tree before, you'd think they were dead. You'd be tempted to cut them down for firewood.

Then something weird happens. The sticks become slightly more knobbly. You only notice it if you look carefully. And one day there'll be a flower or two, balanced on hard, grey wood. Incredibly delicate, pink with crimson buds, surrounded by tiny green leaves. It seems impossible that such fragile beauty could emerge from something that looks so unforgiving.

Ridiculous, or just an appalling cliché, to say it seems like a miracle – like magic, in fact – but every year, in spring, living in this place, it strikes me again, quite freshly, that this is what it is.

Magic.'[3]

'I am playing a game in Del,' Lief tells himself in a tense scene in book 2, *The Lake of Tears*. He's making his way across a bridge that is disintegrating under his feet. We're reminded these are classic stories for the children of a technological age. Note the way he thinks in the present tense, and think back to the words of the picture book, *Power and Glory*: 'I walk the path. I climb the wall. I swim the stream. I find the key. I search the cave. I fight the witch … I fight the witch … I fight the witch.'

The heroes' quest continues but not always at a feverish pace. Quests rarely do. During a moment of calm on the way to the city of Ralad, Lief contemplates all he's left behind, even feels stirrings of homesickness. 'Suddenly, he longed for a hot, home-cooked meal. He longed for a warm bed and a comforting voice bidding him goodnight.' Perhaps he wants to be a child again.

Their next obstacle is a ring of quicksand from which they are rescued by a seemingly innocuous couple, Nij and Doj, who speak in a strange language. They're a comical sight which reminds us how important humour is in fantasy to leaven the peril and menace. I think we're as relieved to see them as our heroes. Lief has recently been tricked, but we're not yet suspicious of everyone and everything, are we? Have we begun, though, to look at the structure of words – especially names – to seek meaning? Do we anticipate more anagrams and codes?

We have an advantage over the friends again, in that we see the words written; we know Nij and Doj are speaking backwards. But do we take the text on the sampler, LIVE NO EVIL, at face value? Or are we reading too much into everything?

Jasmine is wary of the couple's cosy set-up as they aim to lure the travellers into a sense of security. We're reminded she is different from Lief; her parents were brutally murdered by those in the pay of the Shadow Lord. She has lived wild, her instincts are different from Lief's and Barda's.

At the Lake of Tears they must face the monster Soldeen who proposes to surrender the gem as a trade

for the music-making Ralad man. The friends' loyalty stir compassion in the monster and Lief appeals to its better nature – to the kinder self the monster once was. The power to transform – from good to bad and back again – is perpetuated in these stories, as in so many fairy tales. Lief offers the chance for Soldeen to atone for 'what you have lost'. Loss – that great Emily Rodda theme that sweeps through the oeuvre.

And at last the second gem, the ruby, is restored to the belt.

Most of the puzzles are language based or pictorial. World puzzles had been a staple of Emily's stories for years, as far back as *Finders Keepers*, where Patrick has to unravel Clyde O'Brien's clue. *A tree has died to give me birth/But still I shelter feathered friends/I'm large and heavy, coloured earth …*

Words are Emily's first love, but she uses number puzzles sparingly – and always gets the maths checked by someone else. Maths, however, is a strength of Lief's and no doubt many readers, too (if not our writer!). In the bridge-crossing scenario in book 2, each of the travellers has to answer a question. Jasmine's is pictorial, while Barda's is a simple riddle. Lief, who goes last, is set the most complex challenge in the form of a long rhyme about Thaegan, the sorceress who rules the lands of the north. Lief is confident in his maths skills, but he doesn't foresee that it's a trick question.

There's another maths challenge in book 3, *City of the Rats*. This time, devised by Lief in order to confound attacking monsters and see them destroy each other,

rather than him. It's a comic scene, even though it could have backfired.

Deltora Quest is full of the tropes of traditional tales, showing that authors are free to borrow so long as they prepare the ingredients in innovative ways. In the third instalment, we're introduced to another tried-and-tested device: proleptic irony, which gives the reader an advantage over the characters: 'Later, he was to remember that thought – remember it bitterly.'

We're never far from a retail opportunity in Emily's world, as we've seen in the chapters describing *Finders Keepers, Bungawitta, Death in Store* and *The Shop at Hooper*s *Bend*. In *City of the Rats*, we have another unique retail outlet. Its branding, just the owner's name, Tom, proves to be deceptively simple – a true marketing triumph! (Of course, I wondered if it was an homage to Tom Rodda's shop in Bullaburra.) The shop is full of things travellers covet and the owner seems so trusting you could probably steal, if you were minded to. Probably. He has one of the simplest and surely most persuasive mottos in retail: *Choose carefully. No exchanges! No refunds! No regrets!* So much has happened in this instalment that we're not reminded till Chapter Six why the trio are headed for the City of Rats – that it's another location where an Ak-Baba was seen hovering in the sky the morning the Shadow Lord invaded Del. These are the vicious avian monsters whose presence is always a sign that the gem has been hidden nearby.

There's a deception in this story but perhaps the

greatest threat is an internal one. Three-quarters of the way through the book, the trio are not communicating with each other. Surely this will lead to trouble … With only pages to go at the end, their disparate views are given voice. Jasmine admits she is sceptical of the benefit of restoring the Belt of Deltora. 'Do we really *want* kings and queens back in the palace at Del, lying to us and using us as they did before? I do not think so!' In the face of so much opposition – so many monsters serving the Shadow Lord, other people they encounter on their journey – have we taken the integrity of their alliance for granted? How important is teamwork in a hero's world? A big question to ponder.

If you think of any beloved TV series, there's usually an episode which transplants the characters from their usual environment into an unfamiliar situation. There's the opportunity to cast familiar jokes in new contexts and to provoke reactions that wouldn't arise in normal life.

The opal recovered at the end of the last book has told Lief that he *will* arrive at the Shifting Sands in the so-titled fourth episode. The pressure is off in one sense – Lief knows he won't die anytime soon – but still there are threats which make him doubt the certainty of the prophecy that drives him. He has to face the Ak-Baba. There are helpful, wise fish, and a temporary respite in a tranquil shelter made of trees and soft leaf cover, and delicious apples to feast upon.

But this is no Eden. They are accused of thieving when a plump, little old woman bustles into view, her

face like a wizened old apple. She might look benign but she has the power to conjure a swarm of angry bees (and fortunately the power to call off an attack too). The travellers are keen to distance themselves from her suspicions of them and it's only then that they realise she is Queen Bee, maker of the famous Queen Bee Cider that was prized in Del. All this seems like an interlude as they continue their journey to the Shifting Sands.

Emily has said that for the kinds of books she likes to write, she needs 'to be out and about mixing with people to get it right. I'm not the type to sit alone in a garret and write all the time.' I've mentioned how she worried when she left *The Weekly* that she'd have enough income to support her family but she was also mindful of keeping engaged with the community. Doing some consultancy work for publishers was part of the solution and another was accepting a federal appointment from then prime minister Paul Keating to head of the Government Council for the International Year of the Family in 1994.

In Deltora Quest, it's the interaction with different kinds of people that shapes the narrative as much as the quest itself. And in this book, I think our heroes are more aware than ever of being in contact with other people.

They find themselves among the throng en route to the Rithmere Games where the prize is money. With no food or shelter, nor even anything to sleep on, it seems only logical that the three must enter the games – pseudonymously, to further their quest.

Aussies love their sport but these games are ruthless!

Our heroes are bullish, yet desperate not to have to fight each other in the finals, for there can be only one winner. Their opponents include Glock, a 'short, heavily muscled man'; Neridah, a woman whose 'speed had amazed the crowd'; and Doom, the 'scar-faced stranger' who they have encountered before, at Tom's shop on the way to the City of Rats. The trio may have stumbled upon the games, but is chance governing all that is happening in this story? What role does chance play in stories as opposed to real life?

Jasmine, fuelled by anger which burns away fear, discovers it isn't easy being the victor; in fact, it can make you more vulnerable than you were before you competed. Or so people can lead you to believe …

And soon it emerges the whole scenario of the games is a trap to be overcome …

Free again – at last – they find themselves at the Shifting Sands. (The Rithmere Games seem like part of another story at this point, except for the Guards tasked with recapturing the errant finalists.) The next gem is close but it won't be an easy find. The gems have a 'terrible guardian' – what a beautiful phrase! – who is aware of the trio's quest. Here we face an amazingly disgusting monster with bellies that distend so it looks like an enormous bunch of grapes. The Sand Beast erupts and devours the Grey Guards.

Then, even more dramatically, some force – or entity – generates an earthquake so violent that it reconfigures the landscape. The desert storm is seemingly an act of settlement, some kind of wild exchange.

Lief is reminded of something he's seen before. This is a sequence more tense than anything we've read so far:

> Death swarms within its rocky wall
> Where all are one, one will rules all.
> Be now the dead, the living strive
> With mindless will to … survive.
>
> He knew that he did not have the last lines quite right.
> But two words he was quite sure about.
> Mindless will.
>
> A thing of mindless will rules the Shifting Sands and all that was precious in that fearsome place it gathered to itself. The terrifying creatures who shared its domain could have the flesh of their victims and welcome. The Guardian wanted only the treasure the victims carried.
>
> For the first time since entering the Sands, Lief touched the Belt under his shirt, checking that the fastening was secure. As he did, his fingers brushed the topaz, and suddenly his mind cleared.'

The living Sand has created 'an awesome sight. And unbelievably horrible.' A pyramid of death holds the next gem, the lapis lazuli, which must be swapped with something of a comparable size and weight so as not to jeopardise the whole structure. And what might that be? Lief remembers – or intuitively feels – the small wooden bird of Jasmine's that he found and pocketed. Often in

Emily's stories – in the crime novels especially – it's the little details that matter most. And small things – like a hornet trapped in a spider's web – can inspire the largest, most ferocious beasts. This made me recall Emily's comment on *The Mix*: 'My son Alex said to me when he was really little, "Mum, you're interested in such small things."'

And so to book 5, *Dread Mountain.* By now, Lief, Jasmine and Barda are well known to many of the communities in Del; surely they must have come to the attention of the Shadow Lord? It's taken its toll: 'How careful we have become? I remember a time when we were bolder.' Childhood seems long ago – with nostalgia Lief recalls an old toy he once had, and 'old tales and picture books'. Redundant items, belonging to another life; another *person*, in fact. In future, they'll need to get cunning and use disguise to cover their tracks.

In Emily Rodda's tales, there are plenty of references to children's books being relics from a past the characters have moved beyond. Colin is surprised by his investment in Walter's book, which on first inspection looks like a work for children. 'This isn't like me … Why do I care so much?' he puzzles. Examining the scenes painted on the music box in *The Key to Rondo*, Leo 'suddenly remembered an old story he'd read about an emperor who loved listening to the song of a nightingale.' Back then, he'd read 'stories about genies who lived in bottles' but, preferring logic and order, he hasn't read any fantasy in years.

But you can't escape the classic stories. The apt short-story title 'Forbidden Fruit' brings to mind the suspicion in *Grim Pickings* that the victim was killed by eating poisoned apples. The mysteries are full of nods to myth and classic tales – 'Leda and the Swan' runs through *Lamb to the Slaughter*. Central to *Grim Pickings* is an old Noah's Ark model: 'The firelight flickered on its soft, faded colours and the beautifully proportioned curve of the rainbow arching over it. At the highest point of the rainbow perched the white dove, wings outstretched, a green twig in its beak.'

The trio are moved by the forlorn words inscribed in blood on a cave wall:

> Who am I? All is darkness. But I will not despair.
> Three things I know.
> I know I am a man.
> I know where I have been.
> I know what I must do.
> For now, that is enough.

Questions of identity are the lifeblood of Emily Rodda stories, but I think these words derive their poignancy from their simplicity. In today's world we are often overwhelmed with options – think again of *Power and Glory* and *Game Plan* – but sometimes, the fewest choices can create the most challenging dilemmas. Equally, however, a small amount of knowledge can provide great power.

The trio's quest leads them next into the gnomes'

stronghold where something of value must be found. The gnomes are 'clever, hate strangers and love cruel jokes'. Their trick entrance has fooled many, and nearly claims Jasmine. Once inside, the travellers have what seems like a simple choice of three paths. But the deceptions continue: a mirror that acts as a window from the outside so the captors can watch their prey.

We meet the toads' master, Gellick, with the amethyst embedded in his forehead, who wants the travellers dead. Jasmine almost succumbs but Lief remembers the words of the blue book – as he has done in each volume – that describes not only the meaning of each gem but its capabilities. The ruby acts as an antidote to venom, and saves Jasmine.

The Maze of the Beast, book 6, starts with a bang as our travellers rescue seemingly vulnerable girls from certain drowning but these distressed damsels prove to be monstrous Ols, shape-changers from the Shadowlands. Note to self: watch out for twins, who are rarely good news in fiction.

Barda is attacked (*again* – his age and vulnerability are more apparent in these later tales) but is saved by none other than Dain, who we last saw after the Rithmere Games. A returnee from an earlier book – of course, being a serial, Deltora Quest has returning guests, like a TV soap – they met Dain in Book 4 at the Rithmere Games.

Dain complicates things in a new way: there's a flutter of attraction between him and Jasmine, which Lief resents, as much as he dislikes his own sense of guilt at causing

Dain harm and the obligation to return him safely to the Resistance stronghold. Perhaps most irritating of all is that Dain seems too good to be true:

> Dain made him uncomfortable. His gentle, polite ways were appealing, his quiet dignity was impressive, and, despite his lack of great strength, he had acted bravely in saving them from the Ols. But though he seemed easy-going on the surface, Lief could sense that there was something deep inside him that was hidden. Some secret he kept to himself.

This book challenges Lief's – and our own – concepts of heroism and cowardice. Not everyone can be a hero and perhaps it's better to admit you're a coward than make false claims of bravery.

Elsewhere in the story, Barda makes the sage point: 'Looks and words can be deceiving', which could be the central message of the series.

Towards the end of the story, it seems the quest is over. New evidence suggests they have been betrayed by Doom, who we've learned is the leader of the Resistance who not only loathes the Shadow Lord but resents the former king's decline and fall. So is he our heroes' enemy, or is he simply deeply scarred by his experiences? And what does he really feel for Dain? Does he know more of the boy's story than he's letting on?

The dance of Doom and Dain is a permanent fixture from here until the end.

*

In book 7, *The Valley of the Lost*, we find Lief, Barda and Jasmine travelling by night to avoid detection but the dark conceals all kinds of perils. It seems safest to stay close to the River Tor, despite its associations with previous dangers.

A bridge which promises to take them to the City of Tora (where they still hold out hope of finding the exiled king) is spoiled by Ols, so they must take to the water – a murky soup of old bones and filth and carnage.

I was struck by the richness of the language in this book, without sacrificing the writing's pace and economy. We encounter 'a sulky dawn', soon followed by 'mist crawled sullenly'. The earth is 'breathless', the sky 'leaden'. There are flourishes of archaic la nguage, such as in *The Lake of Tears*. The golden-eyed man 'made no move' and the fear that 'all was lost'.

Lief has matured; or perhaps the cumulative weight of experience has squeezed some ambivalence or conflict from him. He's learning harsh life lessons, such as the realisation that revenge is not in fact sweet.

They make it to the City of Tora, a beautiful structure hewn from a single piece of marble. Although abandoned, there's no sign of it having been attacked – but a cracked marble stone is all the clue they need to know that harm has come. And it was self-inflicted: Tora broke its vow.

Doom is here (along with Neridah the Swift) because Dain is back, having suddenly appeared on the deck of the pirate ship as our travellers try to avoid them. They turn on each other, rather than our heroes, which permits the trio to evade another attack. Dain hopes to find his

parents in Tora but is desperately disappointed.

Doom has been one step ahead of Dain all along, hoping he might spare Dain the pain of his discovery. In the face of Doom's calm, gentle but pragmatic presence, Dain seems petulant and impatient, though he asserts (as our heroes have done before him), 'I am not a child, to be protected and fed with fairy tales.' We know Dain very much needs protecting.

I can understand Dain but Doom still bothers me. So I'm grateful when Lief cuts to the chase and asks, 'Who are you, Doom?' If Lief is seeking to dismantle the myth of the man, doing it comes at a price – finally, in spite of weeks of keeping the purpose of their quest a secret, it all tumbles out. 'We are going to the Valley of the Lost.'

The trio part ways with Doom and Dain who reckon their quest is futile but can't shrug off sly Neridah.

They meet various benign, but pained people but also a being who calls himself the Guardian. Is he a threat? By now our heroes have faced capture many times and have thwarted the most hideous of beasts. What threats remain? Lief notes that the Guardian spoke of games, which proves to Barda that he is human, at least. 'It is humans who like games.' And perhaps, being human, it's no surprise he wants to be indulged – he wants an audience. (It's human nature!) Prior to the games, he puts on a banquet to showcase his great trophy – 'the symbol of my power', the diamond.

The diamond is perhaps the trickiest customer of all the gems because it 'must be gained without force or trickery' – that's been the Guardian's problem but it

mustn't afflict our heroes. The Guardian's pride – his Achilles heel, his blind spot – must be overcome before the diamond is released, and the game is the opportunity to do just that.

The game is, of course, all about him – the travellers must unravel an acrostic to discover his name, moving from room to room in the palace to decode each letter. Can he really be King Endon, so horribly changed? He is unwilling to surrender the treasure so easily and it's poor Neridah who must face 'ill fortune' – her death – for the diamond to come into the travellers' possession. We might call this poetic justice.

We must empathise with the Torans who became complacent – a crime as old as stories themselves – and began to think their good fortune came from their innate perfection rather than the gift of magic.

I begin to feel sorry for Doom, who can't do right for doing wrong and remains an 'uncomfortable ally'. I like the woman Zeean's inclusive words – 'We need the talents and experiences of all who share our cause. Now, at last, it is time to trust.'

The true Guardian emerges, someone who has been part of the fabric of the story for so long – 'the hermit in the pictures on the rug' – he is called Fardeep. It turns out he was the former owner of the Champion Inn in Rithmere, a prosperous man who fell foul of the Shadow Lord and sought refuge here. But the Shadow Lord's grip on him persisted right up until the travellers defeated the monster who called himself Guardian.

But so much for the king, it's his heir they need to

find. The heir who will wear the Belt of Deltora and restore peace.

At least the Shadow Lord is behind the curve – he doesn't know where Lief, Jasmine and Barda are, or the whereabouts of Endon, Sharn and their child.

And so to the final book, *Return to Del*. What's left?

Barda, Lief and Jasmine braved each of the seven locations and restored the gems to the Belt. But they've yet to find the heir to wear it. With no clues, Lief turns as ever to the blue book, not just the memory of it but a physical copy which survived the destruction of the Guardian's palace. Until that point, he'd had to call upon memorised passages to understand the powers each gem possessed and the warnings they provided. But the book has its limits – it precedes the destruction of the Belt and, so far as it goes, provides history not advice.

Unsure of where to turn, Lief takes some precious drops of the Dreaming Water and conjures in his sleep a scenario in which Fallow, the Ol, is addressing the Shadow Lord. All along, we've expected a confrontation with the evil lord himself but that's not quite what's happening here – although, eerily, the Shadow Lord senses Lief's presence as he observes the exchange. It's confirmed that the Shadow Lord knows that Lief is one of the travellers restoring the Belt and that his parents are mercifully still alive – until Lief is captured at least.

Perhaps uniting the seven tribes – who have been long dispersed – will again keep the Shadow Lord at bay. Our travellers learn that each tribe possessed one

of the seven gems, even if this knowledge had been lost down the years. 'All along I have felt that we were being guided on our quest,' says Lief. 'Now I am sure of it. We must have met members of all the tribes.' A plan begins to cohere, and the intense planning proves to be almost overwhelming: 'When Lief thought of it afterwards, he remembered only pictures.' People (friends) coming and going, fetching others. Disguises adopted. Sketches and diagrams drawn. Farewells made. Then finally, exhausted, sleep and dreams:

> Dreams of desperate searching. Of legs that could not run. Of tied hands and blinded eyes. Of veiled faces and smiling masks that slipped aside to reveal writhing horrors. And, brooding over all, a crawling mass of scarlet and grey, the darkness at its centre pulsing with menace.
>
> Calling him.

The quest has suddenly narrowed and focused – on Lief. But he isn't journeying alone. And both sides are mobilising, quickly, knowing the final reckoning is to come. Although unnamed, we know the 'round old woman, her face as red and crinkled as a wizened apple' is Queen Bee. Tom the shopkeeper is passing on select but vital intelligence. Even the blue book, in the end, has an ace up its sleeve, if only Lief is careful to see it.

A note, stagily placed on a pile of bones, seems to suggest they're too late to find the heir: Endon, his

wife and child are dead. Barda isn't convinced the note is authentic and surely we seasoned readers find it too convenient to be true. But the team have to wait till Barda recovers from a nasty attack from the Grippers before he can make his claim.

Representatives from all the tribes gather at his bedside and it soon emerges that the heir is in their midst. Do we think it's Lief or Jasmine? (It's probably not Barda, whose health has certainly taken a beating in these last three books, reminding us of his mortality.) But what of Doom and Dain, who just can't leave our trio alone? Dain has been travelling with them, but Doom was there at the Resistance stronghold when they arrived.

But if the heir is here then so, inevitably, is a traitor who has led Ichbod, Thaegan's only surviving offspring, from the north-east to here and abducts Dain. Dain … an anagram of Adin. So the quest is to save the heir Dain. Again, can it be so simple? Are we relieved that someone seemingly gentle, who has also shown integrity and strength of spirit, is the reason our heroes have risked danger for so long?

Of course, it isn't that simple. Dain is a Grade 3 Ol. So it's back to the drawing board as far as revealing who the heir might be. Surely it's down to Jasmine and Lief but when Jasmine puts the belt on, nothing happens; it seems to be holding back. Lief then?

The ultimate anagram is the word Deltora itself; and it's Lief who unravels it, who liberates the power of the Belt, and allows the city of Tora to flourish once more. Which must mean … but how? *How?*

Perhaps the chief takeaway emerges when the final deception of the series is revealed. It just goes to show that, despite what we're taught by our elders, sometimes it's good to keep secrets.

Circling

Another glorious insight from my chat with Meredith Burgmann was her description of her friend as a 'chameleon'. Being able to blend into your surroundings and not draw attention to yourself is a useful survival instinct in the wild. But in any situation, I think, it can create space for others to not feel overshadowed or outmanoeuvred; it can convey empathy and humility. I suspect this is true of Emily. That's not to say she habitually recedes into the background, as her career illustrates. She nails her colours to the mast. She stands up for her views and displays her allegiances. No wonder she inspires loyalty in colleagues and friends. Meredith, a self-confessed outsider, made a point of saying, with satisfaction and pride, I believe, 'She could have hung out with the social girls. But she hung out with us.'

Emily is up front and dependable, yes, but subtle and enigmatic at the same time. (This is my version of Emily, as I'm sure you've guessed, though I have tried in this book to show that many others are available, including, of course, her own.) I'm reminded, once again, of the story about the dressmaker and the young girl Milly Dynes. As Emily explained to Booktopia TV, her first inspiration for *Eliza Vanda's Button Box* was her grandmother's

'full to the brim' button box which she inherited. Emily loved the touch and feel of the buttons, the way they look, like 'lollies or cakes in a cake shop window' and the clicking sound they make – 'as if they're talking to each other'.

One day, she found herself looking for a button and asking herself, 'What if they were magic?' (As ever, What if?) Then she remembered a dressmaker who'd had a workroom built outside her house like a treasure case and decided that she was the kind of person who'd own the button box. But she wouldn't just move from suburb to suburb – she wouldn't even remain in the same place. 'She'd do what I often think some people do in the world, which is slip between the layers, find the chinks, go into other worlds that exist with our own. Eliza Vanda calls them patches and inside patches there are different pockets. She visits them – some are strange indeed, some of them are like ours.'

Boxes. Patches. Pockets. Even worlds running alongside our own, like Rin. All of these are possible. For here is a writer who can liberate herself as a craftsperson and adapt the tropes of storytelling, the rules of genre and the perceptions of audience to command her own international readership. If there's an open secret it's her consistent, persuasive success in doing all this. I think this offers generous encouragement to other practitioners.

Barriers come down. Compartments collapse. Emily Rodda has unboxed us all, writers and readers alike.

Imagination is the key to dismantling barricades, she believes: 'the willingness to step outside the square we can

construct around ourselves as we grow up … It can help us understand the past, consider the future, wrestle with the present, find ways and means, believe that anything is possible. Little children do it naturally.' You can see it in the ideas books, housed in the NCACL archives and the current book in note form on Emily's dining-room table when we met …

> There are ideas for [both stories for children and adults] intermingled – everything from a line like, 'You've got to dig deep to bury your daddy' to worked-out plot lines. Sometimes I've even been undecided about which it was [adult or children's] and it took a little while to work that out. I could see a way *The Shop at Hoopers Bend* could have been a book for adults; it would have been different. But the basic idea could have been the same.

So while I began with compartments and splintered identities, it's actually the case that Emily Rodda has torn down the divisions that exist in literature …

> • between writing for children and adults. (She's a firm believer in letting children read whatever they want, knowing that instinctively, with confidence, they often graduate onto more complex and ambitious works. She has also expressed the desire for the walls to come down between children's and grown-ups' books in bookshops.)

- between writing so-called commercial and literary fiction. (She has suggested, however, that she would rather write a book that people wanted to read than something so literary that it appealed to just a few.)
- between writing 'local' stories that sell only in the domestic market and books that sell in their millions internationally
- between the mundanity of suburban life, as many of us know it, and the rich possibilities of a fantasy world

And best of all, I think, while she writes about contemporary life, addressing an audience as if she were inviting them into a frenetic online game, paring the language down to its essential components without sacrificing insight and emotion, ultimately Emily has more in common with long-ago storytellers (who spent long evenings around the fire, telling stories to anyone who wanted to listen, be they small children or the elderly) than with most contemporary novelists.

At the start of this book, I admitted I wouldn't be able to open every box I came across, but it wasn't something that particularly worried me. Now at the end of my quest, I would like some sense of arriving at a destination, which means bringing the story up to the present.

As we've seen, from 2000 onwards, Emily was absorbed by Deltora – she might say 'obsessed' – with her story canvas getting bigger and richer, sometimes even exceeding her own expectations. In a rare website update in 2016 to announce the publication of *The Hungry Isle*,

she explained, 'When I started [writing Star of Deltora] I was going to make it three books, but then I realised that to tell the story I'd mapped out I was going to need more.'[3] (A useful reminder that stories sometimes make their own demands on even the most organised writers.) *Dog Tales* (2001), illustrated by Janine Dawson, was a joyful interruption. It's a long, highly illustrated storybook which features another gang, though unlike in Teen Power, this gang comprises the dogs who live on Dolan Street. (Oh, and Mavis the goat, who thinks she's a dog.) The dogs tell stories of the comings and goings of suburban life, the frustrations and opportunities, fondly but fairly assessing the behaviour of their 'pets' (human owners). The stories are very similar in theme to Teen Power Inc. and Squeak Street (and even the Birdie mysteries) – there's plenty of intrigue and skulduggery with whiffs of crime and scandal. A one-off, it's a fun – and funny – and unusual novel which has remained sufficiently popular with readers to warrant a 21st anniversary edition in 2022.

The birth of her grandchildren, Kate's son and daughter, Raffy and Sophie, took Emily back to early childhood and the world of imaginative play, resulting in three chapter books, perhaps for readers of between five and eight, the Monty's Island series – *Scary Mary and the Stripe Spell, Beady Bold and the Yum-Yams* and *Elvis Eager and the Golden Egg* – illustrated on every spread in black and white by Lucinda Gifford, and published in 2011 and 2012 by Allen & Unwin.

Emily has said that, often, the hardest part of writing

a book is getting started. (And indeed, before she sits down at her computer to type up the copious notes in her ideas book, she'll have worked out the beginning and the end, but not necessarily the middle.) Voice was key to the Monty stories catching fire – she decided that these would be books to be read aloud, which influenced the pace and tone of the narrative.

The Monty books are substantial 160-page paperbacks, featuring one long, continuous story. There's quite a lot of text, despite the high illustration content. And that was deliberate. Emily had no problem with short books for newly confident readers but what she really wanted to do was offer something longer and more complex; a book to really enjoy and lose yourself in over a sustained period.

Emily talked about the series on the Better Reading website:

> Monty's island is a happy, peaceful place where Monty often finds very interesting things washed up on the beach. Then the famously wicked pirate Scary Mary and her crew appear on the horizon. Monty and his family of friends– Tawny the Fearless Lion, Clink the Shipwrecked Pirate (a parrot with a wooden leg), Bunchy the Magician (a pink elephant), Marigold the Clever Cook (who runs the island Cafe) and Silent Sir Wise (a very intelligent owl) – are desperate to foil Scary Mary's plans to take over the island. Bunchy tries magic, using one of Monty's beach Finds, with disastrous results. Then Monty, who's always full of good ideas, uses a few of his other Finds to save the day

– with a little help from the island's resident monster, the Hairy Horrible.

She went on to say …

> Making up stories for our young grandson, I often found myself telling tales set on an island where talking animals lived and pirates came to visit. He liked these island stories best. In those days, we used to make our own 'island' with play dough and sprigs of leaves from the garden, and use plastic zoo animals to act out the story. When later I wanted to write some entertaining books for children in their first years at school– kids old enough to need and enjoy longer stories read chapter by chapter– it was natural to use our magic island as a setting for the adventures. It also seemed natural to have a resourceful main character who loves gadgets, adores making plans, and is full of good ideas![4]

Emily explained how *Something Special* came from a story she'd told Kate and how *Scary Mary and the Stripe Spell* came from a story she told Kate's little boy, her grandson. She described it as a sort of 'writing circle' which amazes and delights her. This reminded me of young Declan, whose mother had interviewed Emily 16 years before he did; before this next-generation-fan was even born. In this book we've been in and out of boxes. We've been between the layers. I love the idea of being part of a circle which keeps turning, a bit like a carousel, perhaps, or the figure in a music box that pivots as the music plays.

This circle looks set to continue.

During my adolescence, I was lucky enough to meet Emily several times at literary events in Sydney, though she was so busy with family life and work that she wasn't able to network as vigorously as other authors. Our first meeting was at Gordon Library, in 1990, where she gave a talk about writing crime fiction and children's books. I went to interview her at the offices of *The Australian Women's Weekly*, on Sydney's Park Street, then interviewed her again at her home in Glebe, just after she'd become a full-time writer and *Rowan of Rin* had been published. I next saw her when she was a guest author one Friday evening at the bookshop on Oxford Street where I worked while at university, to celebrate the publication of her crime novel, *Stranglehold*. Then we briefly chatted after her event at the ABA's Book Fair in Sydney's Darling Harbour. That was it – until our meeting in November 2022.

On my visits back to Australia over the previous quarter century, I stocked up on books to keep me in the literary loop. New books by favourite authors, as well as titles from the latest talent. I always bought Emily's. Not that Emily Rodda's books were a barometer of the evolution of Australian literature in the way that other authors were – those who were pioneering young adult fiction or picture books for older readers, or early variants on graphic novel formats, perhaps. Her books weren't even a barometer of what could win the CBCA Younger Readers award: her titles won against short, full-colour storybooks and, increasingly complex and

longer novels which nudged towards the Older Readers category (which in itself has tended to honour books at the teen end of the category). Emily has always done her own thing – the things she loved most – which suited me fine. I've always been drawn to literary outliers.

Emily and I had a lot of catching up to do in a finite period of time, as you can imagine, and obviously there were questions I didn't get to ask or had planned on asking but got diverted by other fascinating tangents. Emily was very obliging in fitting in with my schedule – it was a hectic trip – and was generous with her answers, reaching far back into her own past to recall details about the writing of individual books I was interested in.

I got the sense, too, that I'd arrived at a fortuitous moment in her writing life. She'd already alluded, some years before, as she neared her seventies, to a gear shift in the way she approaches her work. As we've seen in this book, Emily had, over the years, responded to invitations to contribute work to publishers, but that's something she no longer pursues. In 2017, she said …

> At this point you have to say to yourself, 'Fair's fair. I've been doing this since I was in my 30s and in those days, time was infinite and you could play around with all sorts of stuff. And if someone said, 'How about writing this?' you'd think, 'Ooh, that'd be fun, let's try that.' I am not doing that now. I think quite carefully before starting a new thing. Kids often ask me, 'Will you go on writing forever?' and I say, 'Well, there will come a time when people don't want to read what I write and

that will be the only time that I will stop, and even then I will probably keep going'. And they say, 'But won't you run out of ideas?' and I say 'I've got more ideas in my book than I could ever write if I lived two lifetimes' and that is more or less true.

And she augmented this in our interview:

I don't want to sound melodramatic or anything but probably about ten years ago, I thought – because I do like a challenge! – 'I have got to only write those things that I would be really sorry if I never did.' I thought, it's not as if I'm going to be able to do this forever. And I have done that now.

She also pointed out that it's not always the case that a writer gets to choose what to write about and when. Ideas, she noted, have to wait their turn before they're ready to be committed to paper. 'Sometimes [it's] because you can't think of how to tell them exactly. And sometimes you're just not ready. The Rondo books took forever somehow. But then, some become urgent and you think, I just can't wait.'

She assured me she had plenty of ideas left. 'Things do pop up still now and then and you think, "That'd be good …"', but there's definitely a sense in her mid-seventies of a line being drawn. Although, happily, there's no question of an end to the books.

When we met, Emily was getting over finishing the final work in her 'things that I would be really sorry if I

never did' – the three-volume novel *Landovel* for middle-grade readers, which as I write in late 2023 is still a year off publication. She declared that she just couldn't turn her mind to another book for children yet. There's always a degree of what Bob Ryan lovingly calls her 'post-book tristesse' but I sensed it was different this time.

Landovel had been demanding to write, with both the idea of the main character (Derry, a child slave in a pirates' lair, scorned by other prisoners, comforted only by books but troubled by memories of an earlier life) and the location arriving together.

> I'd been thinking about it for a long time. I just kept putting it off and putting it off because I didn't think I was ready. It was too big. Then I thought the beginning was too dark. I didn't have the energy at the time. Very sprawling it was, but it's not so bad now. I'm obsessed with it at the moment.

I get the sense that once published, books no longer worry at Emily or consume her attention. Although she has said she likes all her books – that choosing favourites would be like choosing between her children – she never rereads them. 'The most I do is listen to them as audio books,' she confided to me.

> And I always want to cut them. I could have left this out or I should have done that. Sometimes people say, 'Can you read 500 words?' which I do but I don't like it. I feel too self-conscious to put too much expression

in. I find it difficult once they're out there.

But publishers reissue books and return them to the spotlight. (Emily claimed to have 'forgotten about' Fairy Realm until David Francis bought the rights to reissue them in a new format.) Scholastic Australia has published anniversary editions of the Rowan chronicles and Deltora Quest, and republished *Finders Keepers* and *The Timekeeper* in an omnibus edition, as well as an omnibus edition of The Three Doors Trilogy. Every few years, most recently in 2017, HarperCollins brings out new paperback editions of the first three stories, always reusing Noela Young's artwork, integrated into new cover designs and with fresh typesetting inside.

Teen Power Inc. was re-released with new cover artwork in Australia but long ago in 1998; it was also published abroad. But the books have fallen out of print. Emily told me she still gets asked about them, from time to time. One viewer in the 2020 Dymocks audience wondered what became of the gang. Forced to think out loud, Emily offered …

> I've always thought that Liz was going to be a writer; I think she'd decided that by the end of the series. Tom is obviously going to be a painter. Elmo is going to either stay running the Pen, or go off and be a journalist somewhere else because that's his thing … but even if he does go off and be a journalist somewhere else he'll go back to the Pen because that's his family business. Nick … hmm … well, he loved computers but I somehow

think he might go off and study law! That seems to me like the sort of thing he might do. Richelle … gosh, what would she do? I think by now she'd probably have children and probably be a … fashion adviser. That would suit her. I don't think she'd ever make it into movies like she hoped. But I think she could easily be in fashion. Then there's Sunny … I think she would have probably had an excellent sporting career and now she would be coaching a team of some sort.

They also wondered if the series might make a complete return to print. Emily reflected that the 90s technology might make them seem outdated to modern readers … then realised the Famous Five books she'd loved in the 1950s were still very much in print today. So who knows what's possible in terms of a reissue?

But at the time of our meeting, she *had* been actively rereading the Birdie books. Just as had happened all those years before, she realised she couldn't find anything new in the clue puzzle genre. So why not write a new one? Birdie was Emily's contemporary so she'd be in her seventies now. Birdie's father, Angus, is dead but Dan Toby is alive, now approaching 90. 'I thought I'd enjoy it,' she said, 'which is half the battle.' And besides, having written so many books for young readers in the past decade, 'I think it's time.'

I cheered this development, being sad when the Verity Birdwood series came to an end. Emily explained that she had been approached by film and television producer Hal McElroy about adapting the Birdie books for TV. But

the idea of an amateur detective didn't appeal to the TV executives he approached (in spite of the huge popularity at the time of American series *Murder, She Wrote*). What was wanted was a police officer. Emily wasn't willing to change Birdie's profession, so she invented a completely new character, Tessa Vance for a new series, *Murder Call*.

> I created the series and its characters with Hal's help, and then I wrote all the storylines for the first series … Although the mysteries are classic whodunnits, the episodes are faster and tougher than one might expect from a normal murder series. In other words, I tried to blend two genres.
>
> Tessa can do things that Birdie can't do – and vice versa. They come at the problem from different directions, following different rules. Tessa has to deal with police politics, has to work strictly within the law, and according to procedure. She deals almost invariably with complete strangers who know she's a homicide detective. Birdie can be incognito and, of course, very often works with people she knows.

However, 'I never took to Tessa Vance in the same way I took to Birdie,' Emily told me. 'I find police procedures just isn't my thing at all.' In fact, she missed writing about Birdie and completed a few short stories about her, just to 'keep in touch'.

So we'll watch this space, anticipating another story. And others beyond it. And remember, there are other

boxes to unpack. One I couldn't leave unopened held the question: if Emily hadn't improvised the story that became *Something Special,* did she think she'd ever get back into writing? She said, 'I'd always thought that maybe I could write biographies. That would be a way of writing where I didn't have to make up a story.' Then she paused, and shook her head. 'I really don't know why I was so unconfident because, actually, I love plotting.'

A box I'd like to venture into more deeply, if the opportunity arose, is the collected letters from readers, which includes some of Emily's responses. There are whole-class copycat project letters, which ask the same questions over and over again (although each is rendered endearingly in the child's idiosyncratic handwriting and sometimes with illustrations).

Most of all, I was fascinated by a response from Emily in September 1990 to someone called Shaun who seemed to have written to Emily Rodda – for it was she who signed the letter – submitting a poem for *The Weekly* and proposing a collaboration on a collection. Emily politely declined the invitation owing to other commitments. One wonders, what might have been? And were there other readers, comfortable to blur the boundaries between the dual personae, who would have scorned the ignorance of journalists amazed that she (*both* women?) achieved so much when, to them (as to Emily herself), it seemed like something you just got on with?

For our interview, Emily and I sat at the long dining-room table, with Bob and Sadie cosily in the adjacent living room that looked out on lush Australian bushland.

After I switched off my recording device, Emily took me into her workroom, where the formal writing process is undertaken, on a small laptop, once the notebooks contain the beginning and end of a story, if not the middle. Having glimpsed it in photos and on videos, I was desperate to see this room for myself. Light-filled, it too overlooks the bushland below. Bookshelves dominate the space: behind Emily's desk, there are floor-to-ceiling shelves, and more shelves either side of the desk. Most of the books on the left of the desk are by other people – I saw plenty of the crime writers I've loved since my teenage years well represented. The shelves to the right hold copies of the Emily Rodda books, sometimes in leaning piles, sometimes stacked flat. They're interspersed with objects that Emily has gathered to remind herself of the subject she is writing about. Some of them are gifts from readers who have crafted a Deltora Quest belt or a star inspired by the Fairy Realm stories, and sent them to Emily to express their appreciation. There are gifts from Bob and the children and their grandchildren. There's a treasure chest, too, studded with gems, that she made for traveller Hal years ago.

These objects make her feel comfortable and happy. They are all talismans of creativity and the interaction between story makers and readers, between imagination and reality. They are too cherished to be boxed up, and sit comingled, lovingly but artlessly displayed, for all the worlds to see.

By Emily Rodda

PICTURE BOOKS

Power and Glory (illustrated by Geoff Kelly, Allen & Unwin, 1994)

Yay! (illustrated by Craig Smith, Omnibus Books, 1997)

Game Plan (illustrated by Craig Smith, Omnibus Books, 1998)

Where Do You Hide Two Elephants? (illustrated by Andrew McLean, Omnibus Books, 2001)

The Long Way Home (illustrated by Danny Snell, Working Title Press, 2001)

Squeak Street (illustrated by Andrew McLean, Working Title Press, 2002)

ILLUSTRATED STORYBOOKS

Crumbs! (illustrated by Kerry Argent, Omnibus Books, 1990)

Fairy Realm (illustrated by Veronica Oborn, Transworld Publishers, 1994–96)

1. *The Charm Bracelet*
2. *The Flower Fairies*
3. *The Third Wish*
4. *The Last Fairy-Apple Tree*
5. *The Magic Key*
6. *The Unicorn*
7. *The Star Cloak*
8. *The Water Sprites*
9. *The Peskie Spell*
10. *The Rainbow Wand*

Bob the Builder and the Elves (illustrated by Craig Smith, ABC Books, 1998)

Gobbleguts (illus Stephen Axelsen, ABC Books, 2000)

Green Fingers (illustrated by Craig Smith, Omnibus Books, 2001)

Fuzz the Famous Fly (illustrated by Craig Smith, Omnibus Books, 2001)

Dog Tales (illustrated by Janeen Dawson, Omnibus Books, 2001)

Squeak Street (illustrated by Andrew McLean, Working Title Press, 2005–07)

1. *Old Bun and the Burglar*
2. *One-shoe's Wishes*
3. *Fee-Fee's Holiday*
4. *Pink-Paw's Painting*
5. *Lucky Clive*
6. *Quick-Sticks' Magic*
7. *Kevin to the Rescue*
8. *Tails and the Twin Spell*
9. *Addy and the Pirates*
10. *Ben the Post-Mouse*

Monty's Island (illustrated by Lucinda Gifford, Allen & Unwin, 2020–21)

1. *Scary Mary and the Stripe Spell*
2. *Beady Bold and the Yum-Yams*
3. *Elvis Eager and the Golden Egg*

NOVELS

*Something Specia*l (illustrated by Noela Young, Angus & Robertson, 1984)

Pigs Might Fly (illustrated by Noela Young, Angus & Robertson, 1986)

The Best-Kept Secret (illustrated by Noela Young, Angus & Robertson, 1988)

Finders Keepers (illustrated by Noela Young, Omnibus Books, 1990)

The Timekeeper (illustrated by Noela Young, Omnibus Books, 1992)

Teen Power Inc. (Ashton Scholastic, 1994–1999)

1. *The Ghost of Raven Hill*
2. *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*
3. *The Disappearing TV Star*
4. *Cry of the Cat*
5. *Beware the Gingerbread House*
6. *Green for Danger*
7. *Breaking Point*
8. *The Secret of Banyan Bay*
9. *The Bad Dog Mystery*
10. *Poison Pen*
11. *The Missing Millionaire*
12. *Crime in the Picture*
13. *Nowhere to Run*
14. *Dangerous Game*
15. *Haunted House*
16. *The Case of Crazy Claude*
17. *Fear in Fashion*
18. *Danger in Rhyme*

19. *Cry Wolf*
20. *Photo Finish*
21. *Stage Fright*
22. *Saint Elmo's Fire*
23. *Bad Apples*
24. *The War of the Work Demons*
25. *Dirty Tricks*
26. *Hot Pursuit*
27. *Hit or Miss*
28. *Deep Freeze*
29. *The Secret Enemy*
30. *Dead End*

Bungawitta (illustrated by Craig Smith, Omnibus Books, 2011)

The Shop at Hooper's Bend (Angus & Robertson, 2017)

His Name Was Walter (Angus & Robertson, 2018)

*Eliza Vanda's Button Box (*Angus & Robertson, 2021)

HIGH FANTASY STORIES

Rowan of Rin (Omnibus Books, 1993–2003)
Rowan of Rin
Rowan and the Travellers
Rowan and the Keeper of the Crystal
Rowan and the Zebak
Rowan of the Bukshah

Deltora Quest (Ashton Scholastic/Omnibus Books, 2000–16)
Series 1
1. *The Forests of Silence*
2. *The Lake of Tears*

3. *City of Rats*
4. *The Shifting Sands*
5. *Dread Mountain*
6. *The Maze of the Beast*
7. *The Valley of the Lost*
8. *Return to Del*

Series 2

1. *Cavern of the Fear*
2. *The Isle of Illusion*
3. *The Shadowlands*

Series 3

1. *Dragon's Nest*
2. *Shadowgate*
3. *Isle of the Dead*
4. *The Sister of the South*

Star of Deltora

1. *Shadows of the Master*
2. *Two Moons*
3. *The Towers of Illica*
4. *The Hungry Isle*

Illustrated Deltora books with Marc McBride

Deltora Book of Monsters (2002)
How To Draw Deltora Monsters (2005)
Tales of Deltora (2005)
Secrets Of Deltora (2009)
Deltora Quest Manga: Books 1 – 10 (Kodansha USA Publishing, 2013)

Rondo (Omnibus Books, 2008–9)
1. *The Key to Rondo*
2. *The Wizard of Rondo*
3. *The Battle for Rondo*

Three Doors Trilogy (Omnibus Books, 2012–13)
1. *The Golden Door*
2. *The Silver Door*
3. *The Third Door*

The Glimme (illustrated by Marc McBride, Scholastic Australia, 2019)

Landovel (Allen & Unwin, 2024)

TEEN FICTION

The Julia Tapes (Penguin Books Australia, 1999)

FICTION FOR ADULTS (as Jennifer Rowe)

Grim Pickings (Allen & Unwin, 1987)

Murder by the Book (Allen & Unwin, 1989) *Death in Store* (Allen & Unwin, 1991)

The Makeover Murders (Allen & Unwin, 1992)

Stranglehold (Allen & Unwin, 1993)

Lamb to the Slaughter (Allen & Unwin, 1995)

Deadline (Allen & Unwin, 1998)
Something Wicked (Allen & Unwin, 1999)
Angela's Mandrake and Other Feisty Fables (Allen & Unwin, 2000)
Love, Honour and O'Brien (Allen & Unwin, 2011)

Notes

Questing

[1] Dempsey, Dianne, *Sunday Age* Agenda, 19.04.92.

[2] See: theguardian.com/books/video/2020/nov/09/thats-such-a-good-one-emily-rodda-author-of-deltora-quest-answers-kids-questions-video

Chapter 1: Reality and Myth

[1] Wheatley, Jane, Mother of Invention, *Good Weekend*, 09.08.97

[2] In the NCACL archive, there's an undated internal memo from to Richard Walsh, presenting the manuscript for 'Emily Rodda's new book', with characteristic modesty and detachment – 'please let me know if you like it and think we should publish' – and suggesting the package be based on *The Enemies* by Robin Klein or Duncan Ball's *The Ghost and the Goggle Box*. (Walsh's reply: 'I loved every pig tumbling minute of it! Thank you for such fun, love, R.')

[3] Forrest, Lisa, Nightlife: The Writers, ABC Radio National, 2020

[4] Ibid.

[5] Cadzow, Jane, It's Murder at the Top, *Australian*'s *Weekend Magazine*, 6-7.12.96

[6] Spresser, Karen, Jennifer Puts the Family First, *Advertiser*, 15.12.92

[7] Behind Jennifer Rowe, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26.03.88

[8] Byrne, Jennifer, Lunch With Jennifer Rowe, *The Bulletin,*

[9] Wheatley, Jane, op. cit.

[10] McLeod, Steve, Murder She Writes, *Sunday Age*, 19.11.89

[11] Kissane, Karen, Laughter Lines, *Sunday Age,* 22.08.99

[12] Interview in the American edition of *Suspect*, Ballantyne Books, 1998

[13] Noela Young (1930–2018) was a much-loved Sydney-based illustrator who for six decades contributed to the NSW Department of Education's *The School Magazine* and illustrated many books for children of all ages, including, for Angus & Robertson, Duncan Ball's *Ghost and the Gory Story* (series) and Ruth Park's *The Adventures of the Muddle-Headed Wombat* books.

[14] *Better Reading* interview, 2017

Chapter 2: Secrets and Lives

[1] Rowe, Jennifer, A Bloom of One's Own: Eight Writers Pen their Odes to Spring, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30,08.19
[2] Return to Deltora, *Junior*, Term 3, 2015
[3] See: www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_perma-link&v=958433151279563

[4] Meredith Burgmann writes of her early years in her essay in *Radicals: Remembering the Sixties*, eds. Wheatley, Nadia and Burgmann, Meredith, NewSouth Publishing, 2021
[5] See: bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=eliza+vanda+booktopia+australia+podcast&mid=E446506CA728491BB3DFE-446506CA728491BB3DF
[6] Forrest, Lisa, op. cit.
[7] Ahearne, Wielding Clout at the *Weekly*, *Australian Society*, March 1988
[8] readingtime.com.au/acceptance-speech-emily-rodda-his-name-was-walter-winner-book-of-the-year-younger-readers

Chapter 3: The Publisher

[1] A full list of all the CBCA annual book award winners can be found at cbca.org.au/previous-winners
[2] Perhaps only the cut-and-thrusting weekly paper, *Nation Review*, further down the corridor, gave a nod to A&R being engaged in the latter part of the twentieth century.
[3] Harper, Sally, Angus & Robertson's Involvement with the Children's Book Scene, *Orana*, November, 1988
[4] *Josh*, published in 1971, was internationally acclaimed and remains the only Australian novel to have won the prestigious Carnegie
Medal
[5] The proceedings from this conference, and those in the 1983-86 conferences, were collected in *The Inside Story: Creating Children's Books*, edited by Belle Alderman and Stephanie Owen Reeder. Earlier volumes were *Writing and Illustrating for Children: Children's Book Council ACT Seminars 1975-80* (ed. Eleanor Stodart, 1985) and *The Imagineers: Writing and*

Illustrating Children's Books (ed. Belle Alderman and Lauren Harman, 1983). These are important records because far from recording each talk in isolation, prepared from a desk in a far-off city – remember how expensive it was to phone, let alone visit – other states in the 70s and 80s? – these gatherings enabled interaction between creatives who had never previously met. They took full advantage of it.

[6] There were submissions from literary agents and authors already on the list to consider too. Emily told Jane Cadzow in 1986, 'It's a dreadful thing when you feel you're keeping them waiting. I think it's really salutary for a publisher also to be an author.' While she didn't satirise publishing in *Murder by the Book*, she had a gentle pop at self-published authors in *The Shop at Hoopers Bend*, when a job lot of 22 boxes of *Zombie Blood Hunt* is bought from the pop-up bookshop not for its physical qualities rather than literary achievement.

[7] Harper, Sally, op. cit.

Chapter 4: Modern Family

[1] McLeod, Steve, op. cit.

[2] Forrest, Lisa, op. cit.

[3] McLeod, Steve, op. cit.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Forrest, Lisa, op. cit.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Mappin, Alf, Know the Author: Emily Rodda, *Magpies*, July 1990

[8] Dempsey, Dianne, op cit.

[9] Better Reading interview, 2017

[10] Classroom, op. cit.

[11] Emily contributed *Gobbleguts*, illustrated by Stephen Axelsen, to ABC Books' series of tall tales told in verse, aimed at developing readers of 8-11, described as 'action-packed verbal and visual feasts'.

[12] After its sale to Scholastic, Jane Covernton and Sue Williams established another highly successful brand-new independent publisher, Working Title Press, which published many loyal Omnibus authors and illustrators.

When Jane retired in 2017 (Sue having left the business some years earlier), the list was sold to HarperCollins, so more of Emily Rodda's backlist is with the company who first published her.

Chapter 5: The Full-Time Writer

[1] Emily Rodda: The Early Years, *The Book Curator*, Sept 2017
[2] Letter from Jeffrey Garrett, English Language Section of the IYL to Emily, 25.03.88
[3] Inspiring the scenario for the annual apple picking weekend, the setting of *Grim Pickings*.
[4] Pedley, Salda, Murderous Mum Likes Her Villains on Screen, *Sunday Mail*, 12.11.89
[5] 'It became a symbol to me,' Emily said to Byrne. 'I don't actually have anything against nails, like I don't have anything against linen – well, I do, actually, it's a bugger of a thing – but you've only got time for certain things.' In other interviews, she described a practical preference for polyester.
[6] Spresser, Karen, op. cit.
[7] Kate Rowe commented on this, in a *Good Weekend* feature called '2 of Us' (24.10.09) where she and Jenny commented on their impressions of others. 'I wrote stories as a kid and funny plays at high school. I co-wrote some of the Teen Power books with Mum but it was always a real slog. It was so easy for her that I thought that's how it should be for me. I kept trying. On the side, I had all these songs rolling out but it didn't occur to me that that was my medium.' Kate is now an accomplished singer/songwriter and performer, living in Perth.
[8] See: artsunit.nsw.edu.au/video/nsw-premiers-reading-challenge-2021-author-talks-primary-04-emily-rodda
[9] Ibid.

Chapter 6: Retail Therapy

[1] Sanderson, Julie, Unreal Quest, Sunday *Mail,* 18.06.00
[2] Mappin, Alf, op. cit
[3] Ibid.

[4] See: betterreading.com.au/news/author-related/creating-a-magical-island-author-emily-rodda-shares-the-inspiration-for-her-new-series-montys-island

[5] Emily Rodda's books have regularly featured on the state-based children's choice awards.

[6] Letter from Jane Covernton, 11.10.91

[7] Dymocks event, op. cit.

[8] Both the video and transcript of this interview can be found here: artsunit.nsw.edu.au/video/nsw-premiers-reading-challenge-2021-author-talks-primary-04-emily-rodda/transcript

Chapter 7: Across the Nine Seas

[1] Deltora Quest's translation publishers are: Edizioni Piemme Italy [Italian]; Elex Media Komputindo, Indonesia [Indonesian]; Panini Verlag, Germany [German]; Egmont Polska, Poland, [Polish]; Iwasaki Shoten, Japan [Japanese]; Borgens Forlag, Denmark [Danish]; Random House Mondadori, Spain [Castilian with Catalan option]; Joongang Publishing Co., Korea [Korean]; One World Publishing, Thailand [Thai]; Shanghai Translation Publishing House, China [Simple Chinese characters]; Den Grimme Aelling, Denmark [Danish Audio]; B. Wahlströms Bokförlag, Sweden [Swedish]; N. W. Damm & Sons, Norway [Norwegian]; Uitgeverij Kluitman Alkmaar BV, the Netherlands [Dutch]; Fragment, Czech Republic [Czech]; Presses Pocket Jeunesses, France [French]; Wisdom & Knowledge Publishing Co, Taiwan [Complex Chinese characters]; Editorial Presenca, Portugal [Portuguese]; Kondyli, Romania [Romanian]; Azbooka Publishing House, Russia [Russian]; Fundamento, Brazil [Portuguese]; M & C Kft, Hungary [Hungarian]; Laguna, Serbia [Serbian]; Fragment, Slovakia [Slovakian]; Altin Kitaplar, Turkey [Turkish]; Tammi, Finland [Finnish]; Scholastic Canada, [French – Canada]. Scholastic US and UK also published the series. With thanks to Scholastic Australia for this information.

[2] The Tweed Head *Daily News* interviewed Emily (17.09.11) as part of the Get Reading tour celebrating *The Golden Door*..

[3] Pedley, Sasha, op. cit.

[4] *Reading Time*, Vol 44, No. 4, November 2000

[5] The first volume of The Three Doors trilogy, *The Golden Door*, was included in the 2011 Australian Council's Get Reading! Guide as one of '50 Books You Can't Put Down'. Emily wrote brand-new stories for a little book to be given away in bookshops. Sixty thousand copies were printed of *The Land of Dragons* which takes readers back to when the world was young, the sea was alive with monsters and all the lands were islands. It will bridge the journey from Deltora Quest to *The Golden Door*.' She toured Australia as an ambassador for the programme.

[6] *Junior* magazine, Term 3, 2015

[7] *Classroom* magazine, Issue 4, 2003

[8] Deltora Quest series concept document, 1999

[9] *Magpies*, op. cit.

[10] Book Curator, op. cit.

[11] *Magpies*, op. cit.

[12] Book Curator, op. cit.

[13] *D:Mag*, Issue 5, April/May 2002

[14] Book Curator, op. cit.

[15] The Mix, op. cit.

Chapter 8: An Australian Imagination

[1] Cunningham, Ilsa, Leura Author Jennifer Rowe Awarded a Companion of the Order of Australia, Blue Mountains *Gazette*, 28.01.19

[2] Abridged translation from Asahi Shimbun, 14 November 2004.

[3] All the CBCA Book of the Year Award shortlists and honours can be found here:

[4] Dargan, Felicity, *Herald Sun*, 30.07.91

[5] Mappin, Alf, op. cit

[6] *Classroom* magazine, Issue 4, 2003

[7] Dutton, Geoffrey, *A Rare Bird: The First 50 Years of Penguin Australia*, Penguin Books, 1996

[8] When *The Shop at Hoopers Bend* was announced, Emily said on the publisher's website, 'It's always an exciting time publishing a new book, and in this case, returning to Angus & Roberston where my writing career began,

makes this all the more special.'

[9] See: booktopia.com.au/blog/2018/01/31/favourite-australian-authors-2018-30-21/

[10] Harris, Samela, She's Bigger than Harry Potter, Advertiser, 02.10.04

[11] Byrne, Jennifer, op. cit

[12] As she prepared for a trip to the Brisbane Writers Festival, Emily told the *Courier Mail*'s Fiona Burdon 13.08.11

[13] Moore, Jarrah, *Australian Bookseller + Publisher*, May 2011

Chapter 9: Lost Children

[1] Bawden, Nina, *In My Own Time*, Virago Press, 1994

[2] Byrne, Jennifer, op. cit.

[3] Better Reading, interview for *The Shop at Hoopers Bend* launch in 2017

[4] Professor Stephen Knight is an academic who has taught English at the universities of Sydney, Cardiff and Melbourne. His professional biography reveals a 'special interest in non-canonical literature' such as crime fiction. Back in the early 90s, he edited several of Allen & Unwin's seasonal crime fiction anthologies, comprising original Australian stories, including *Crimes for a Summer Christmas* which included Emily's story 'Ladies' Day'. Emily edited 1995's volume, *Love Lies Bleeding*.

Chapter 10: Deltora Diary

[1] Among other themes. This is how Emily described the series in *Magpies* magazine, Deltora: World Building with Emily Rodda,
Magpies, Vol 30, number 3, July 2015. Interview with Kevin Steinberger and Rayma Turton

[2] Price, Jenna, The Big Five-O, *Canberra Times*, 26.10.97

[3] A Bloom of One's Own, op cit.

[4] Spresser, Karen, op. cit.

[5] Byrne, Jennifer, op. cit.

Circling

[1] Mappin, Alf, op. cit.

[2] Story Time Exhibition address, 16.08.19

[3] News, emilyrodda.com, 24.09.16

[4] betterreading, op.cit

[5] *Book Curator*, op. cit.

[6] *Suspect* interview, op. cit.

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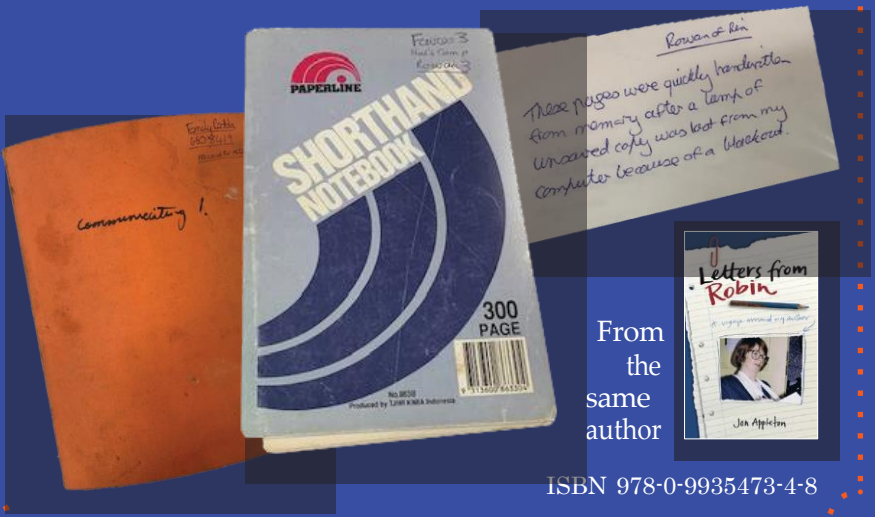
Index

It's 40 years since Emily Rodda's first book, *Something Special*, was published to instant acclaim. Since then, her more than 100 titles have sold 18 million copies in over 30 countries. They include *Finders Keepers, His Name Was Walter*, *Rowan of Rin* and the phenomenally successful Deltora Quest.

Under her real name – Jennifer Rowe – she has written novels and TV scripts, and held top positions in the Australian media, as publisher at Angus & Robertson and editor of *The Australian Women's Weekly*.

What's her secret? How do you make a writing life work alongside other jobs, other obligations? And to what extent does real life influence the books? Are an author's novels a kind of coded autobiography?

Out of the Box is a celebration of Emily Rodda's art and life – a mirror to the times she has lived through and a tribute to her inner creative life. Drawing on her extensive archives at the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature in Canberra, a recent interview, plus Jon Appleton's lifetime of devoted reading, it's a book for fans of children's literature, anyone interested in Australian publishing, and emerging writers everywhere.



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