

## Productive Anxieties:

### Lostness in *The Arrival* and *Requiem for a Beast*.

Erica Hateley

The classic Australian children's story *Dot and the Kangaroo* (1899) opens with a quintessential scene of lostness:

Little Dot had lost her way in the bush. She knew it, and was very frightened [...] she had pushed madly through the bushes, for hours, seeking her home. [...] The thought of being lost and alone in the wild bush at night took her breath away with fear, and made her tired little legs tremble under her.

(Pedley 1982, p. 1)

In part, Dot's anxiety derives from her knowledge of children lost before her. She remembers the loss and death of a neighbour child whose mother 'never saw that little boy again, although he had been found' (Pedley, p. 2). The allusion to lostness as a state especially threatening to children informs Dot's fear, so that *Dot and the Kangaroo* both draws on and extends what has been influentially described as a particularly 'Australian anxiety' (Pierce 1999). The same landscape which gave rise to mythologies of frontier-like hardship and survival posed real threats to anyone who might become lost in it. Accordingly, the capacity of the Australian environment to consume people infused the cultural productions of a relatively young and sparsely populated colonial society.

Just as the mythologies of landscape and culture continue to inform contemporary Australian culture, cumulative (hi)stories of young Australians lost and stolen continue to be told within

Australia's literature *for* young people. Indeed, recent works such as Stephanie Owen Reeder's *Lost! A True Tale from the Bush* (2009) overtly traffic in such histories, and seem to extend a nostalgically colonial gaze back to figures such as Ethel Pedley's Dot. The trope of lostness also animates complex critical considerations of culture and subjectivity as in Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) and Matt Ottley's *Requiem for a Beast: A Work for Image, Word and Music* (2007), where the experience of lostness shapes the protagonists' journeys, and is understood (like the books themselves) as applicable to children and adults.

Upon their first encounter with *The Arrival* or *Requiem for a Beast*, readers may feel as lost as the books' protagonists. In each book, the protagonist is displaced, geographically and culturally. Tan's migrant protagonist undertakes a journey to a strange land where he lacks knowledge of language and social conventions. Ottley's main character has lost himself in the face of personal and national histories which disrupt the possibility of stable subjectivity; he too relocates (albeit temporarily) to the Australian outback, where he lacks understanding of language and social conventions.

The obvious symbolic links between the figure of the child and the developing nation are not unique to Australia, but the particularities of the Australian environment and history of colonialism have meant that the figure of the child *qua* nation has never been an easy articulation of a hopeful future but has instead identified the child as fragile; always at risk of being defeated or destroyed by the continent.

Australia is the place where the innocent young are most especially in jeopardy. Standing for girls and boys of European origin who strayed into the Australian bush, the lost child is an arresting figure in the history and the folklore of colonial Australia. More profoundly though, the lost child is the symbol of essential if never fully resolved anxieties within the white settler communities of this country.

(Pierce 1999, p. xi)

Pierce concludes *The Country of Lost Children* with a reminder that the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children removed from their families by the Australian government was akin 'to a much more disturbing extent, to the effects on their nineteenth-century communities of white children lost in the bush. The land took those white children. The Aboriginal children were taken from their families and from their land' (Pierce 1999, p. 200). It is unsurprising then,

that in recent years, the fragility of the at-risk child (and at-risk nation) has been as explicitly political as geographic:

a trope of vanishing situated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries within a confident narrative of empire is now being deployed to express anxiety among the heirs of empire. Uneasily rises the thought: perhaps Australia remains terra nullius—perhaps the act of conquest and the laws of possession have not bestowed upon the settler body a final possession of ‘our’ place.

(Frost 2001, p. 220)

It is precisely in the light of such post-colonial tensions in Australian society coupled with the anxieties of lostness which have marked Australian culture that *The Arrival* and *Requiem for a Beast* tell stories of migration and displacement.

Tan and Ottley simultaneously extend and complicate the long cultural tradition in Australia of storytelling about getting or being lost as well as extending and complicating the picture book genre. As such, they are part of a wider movement in Australian picture books, following what Maurice Saxby described as ‘an outbreak of Australiana in the mid 1980s’ (Saxby 1993, p. 22). Twenty years after this outbreak, a significant number of picture books appeared which were willing to engage the political realities of Australian society and culture at the turn of the twenty-first century. Books including, but not limited to David Miller’s *Refugees* (2004), the Save the Children project *Dust* (2007) written by Colin Thompson and illustrated by an international roll-call of illustrators, or John Marsden’s *Home and Away* (2008, illustrated by Matt Ottley) signal the scope and complexity of the contemporary Australian picture book and its capacity to pose difficult questions about national culture and identity.<sup>1</sup> *The Arrival* and *Requiem for a Beast* thematically and formally both draw on and disrupt understandings of the picture book genre and its conventions of word-picture relationships as well as earlier picture-book articulations of Australian national culture.

### **Navigating Space in Picture Books**

It is a truism that picture books are defined by their word-picture relationships; as Lawrence Sipe observes in a summary of several decades of picture-book scholarship: ‘The basic premise of all these perspectives is that a picturebook can only be fully understood when readers/viewers understand the intricate and dynamic relationships between the sign system

of the visual images and the sign system of the words' (Sipe 2012, p. 5). *The Arrival* is an almost wordless story, which nonetheless incorporates graphic representations of (indecipherable) written language. *Requiem for a Beast's* subtitle—*A Work for Image, Word and Music*—draws attention to its use of several verbal modes, written and aural (the book includes an audio CD of music and songs sung by contemporary Bundjalung voices), and readers who engage with the book as a whole are met with various forms of English, Latin, and Aboriginal languages. Thus, although *The Arrival* is nearly wordless where *Requiem for a Beast* is marked by sustained prose as well as complex images, both books nonetheless rely on readerly understanding of visual *and* verbal signs systems as independent and interdependent modes of communication to advance their narratives.

Perhaps more tellingly, the different ways in which visual and verbal modes of communication organise locatedness within picture book narratives mark picture books as especially suited to contemporary explorations of lostness. Where verbal text endows subject positions with particular actions or locations, visual depictions of bodies in space invite viewers to take in both the figured subject shown undertaking an action and/or within a particular location, and the physical and social context for that figure. Visual depictions of spatiality are thus “intertwined with processes of identity-formation and the development of interpersonal relationships” (Bradford and Baccolini 2011, p. 36). Spatiality can also be used to emphasise isolation and strained interpersonal relationships. In *The Arrival* readers are offered a series of nine drawings in a grid which begins with a family photograph and then pulls back to show the protagonist gazing at this photograph of his family while eating dinner, revealing the possibility of interpersonal connections with depictions of people, and so perhaps modelling for the reader a capacity in themselves to connect with the book's depicted protagonist. The perspective pulls back even further to reveal that the man is in a small cabin on a ship, that there are many other such cabins (each presumably populated), and then to reveal that the ship is at sea. The following opening is a double-page spread of the ship now dwarfed by the ocean and roiling clouds. The man's continued connection with his family and the reader's connection with him is both challenged and reinforced by these scales of space and of isolation. A similar strategy is used once the man has arrived in his new city, and readers once again share his gaze at the family photo before pulling back through a window to see that the man now occupies one room among many in a large urban building. As the man develops a sense of his location within this new place, and he builds new

interpersonal relationship, the book's depictions of bodies in space become more frequently images of figures scaled to 'fit' their environment comfortably rather than be dwarfed by it until part VI of *The Arrival* culminates in scenes of the reunited family in a happily shared home, and the man's daughter successfully navigating the urban space.

While a sense of increasing locatedness correlates with a stable and secure sense of identity, dislocatedness or lostness is bound up with a sense of non- or disrupted identity. Lostness not only concerns the possibility of never returning to the familiar, of obliteration or death, but also of historical or subjective dislocation. Dislocated in space, time, or society, the lost subject ceases to be a subject at all, and these anxieties are multiple:

Lostness itself encompasses both a spatial and a temporal aspect: to be lost is to recognize that the unfamiliar place where one is is not the place where one is supposed to be—one is only lost when one is not content where one is, but cannot get to where one would prefer to be. Although there may be a certain anxiety intrinsic to not recognizing one's surroundings, this anxiety is heightened considerably when goal-directed activity has been interrupted by spatial disorientation, and this anxiety is exacerbated even further when there are temporal limitations placed on that goal-directed activity.

(Weinstock 2003, p. 232)

If one goal-directed activity of much children's literature is the development of nationhood and of nationed subjects, it is unsurprising that lostness has plagued the Australian cultural imaginary. In Australian children's literature, real experiences of lost children have long informed cultural expressions of a national identity only ever tenuously anchored in a dangerous landscape. However, lostness need not be only a source of anxiety; if viewed as a productive experience, or a necessary disruption which can lead to new ways of being, lostness can become an opportunity. In other words, disruption to a goal-oriented activity might lead one to either affirm or reject goals which were previously naturalised to the point of seeming inevitability.

### **Labyrinths and Purposeful Lostness**

As suggested by Ottley's appropriation of the Theseus and the Minotaur myth in *Requiem*, the labyrinth may be an ideal symbol and metaphor for nation and national identity in the context of contemporary Australian children's literature. The *OED* offers both a literal definition and also a figurative definition. The former defines the labyrinth as 'A structure consisting of a number of intercommunicating passages arranged in bewildering complexity, through which it is difficult or impossible to find one's way without guidance'; the latter, as 'A tortuous, entangled, or inextricable condition of things, events, ideas, etc.; an entanglement' ('labyrinth' 1989). This 'dark, inextricable maze' (Ovid 2004, 8:158) has become the quintessential puzzle, and serves as a kind of *ur-text* for lostness. The original Labyrinth was commissioned by King Minos, who asked Daedalus to design a space that would serve as both prison and protection for the Minotaur. It is thus a willful and structured obscuring of a past crime—here, a queen giving bastard birth to a monster and thus destabilising a monarchy—in order to preserve an existing social order. As a dense metaphor for existence itself, its form and function are mutually constitutive.

To become lost in the labyrinth is to fulfil its function—this is a predetermined or scripted lostness that serves the normative order. However, to successfully navigate the labyrinth, to become lost in the service of an as-yet-unknown goal, is to disrupt the existing social order and to assert one's subjectivity. Seen in this light, both *The Arrival* and *Requiem for a Beast* offer labyrinthine visions of national identity, and both texts negotiate lostness by requiring of their readers various forms of reading which enable them to become literate within scenarios of lostness. In these works, lostness is necessarily a temporary or transitional experience, as one cannot remain in the labyrinth and remain human. Lostness is resolved through narrative encounter, as reading becomes a key to subjectivity and to national identity.

### ***The Arrival*: Learning to Read**

Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* tells a story that is literally about re-location, but is compellingly silent on the politics of cultural alienation, offering a moving and hopeful account of one man's experience of migration rather than any kind of overt political manifesto. Although there are clearly politicised logics of migration itself in the book, the work's own politics operate on a wider palette than that of any one nation or historical period.

Widespread threats of violence, as represented by massive tentacles moving through and above the streets of his city, oblige the protagonist to leave his home in search of a new safe place to live. The reader travels with him into an unknown world, marked by storm-clouds, strangers, and unknown languages. As he slowly starts to make sense of this new space, though, this protagonist's story is juxtaposed with the positive migration stories of those he encounters in his new homeland, and the emotional, social, and cultural hardships experienced on first arriving are ultimately revealed to be "worth it" when the man is joined by his partner and child. The high modality of the book's photographic-style pencil drawings is tempered with fantastic flourishes. This is perhaps most obvious in the reimagining of historically significant sites such as Ellis Island, which served as a migrant processing centre for the United States from 1892 to 1954. Tan makes explicit visual allusion to familiar spaces such as Ellis Island, but decorates them with unfamiliar alphabets and architectures just as he imagines fantasy creatures to serve as the characters' pets and guides.

Such fantastic realism or realistic fantasy produces a sense of simultaneous locatedness and dislocation; of many countries and no one nation; of particular historical events and many traumas; of and for one and all. Images found in the primary storyline and in the flashback stories of those who help the man navigate his new home seem to invoke specific historical events, but these same images are not strictly limited to such events. For example, the destructive vacuums wielded by masked giants which seem to invoke so clearly the European Holocaust may not be intended as such, and are perhaps even more powerful as symbols of any and all mass-destruction of human life than as referents for one historical moment. In *The Arrival*, Tan both invokes and transcends 'migration' as a near-universal condition of humans in the post-industrial age (at least in the West); it is humans' *experience* of history and culture that forms the focus of this book.

The protagonist and the reader encounter individuals who share their (hi)stories, and focus his and the reader's attention on the personal, individual experiences initiated by 'history'. Even as the book privileges story and shared meaning-making, foregrounding orality rather than literature, it nonetheless privileges literary cultures. When a woman helps the man buy an airship ticket, she shares her own migration narrative. As a young girl, she is removed from independent cultural consumption to communal industrial production: first shown reading a

book, that book is locked away when the girl is put to work feeding a furnace. When she escapes, she rescues the book and effects a reunion between self and story that symbolises her present-day agency of narrating her experiences and selfhood.

The power of subjective narrative is revealed by the seeming impossibility of shared literacy, at least in the sense of partaking in the public textual culture. An obvious example of cultural exile can be seen in the man's brief employment as a bill poster. The man is interrupted while pasting up posters, and the reader learns at the same time the character does that he has been hanging the posters upside down. The symbols on the posters are as unreadable to Tan's reader as they have been to Tan's protagonist; more generally, the reader is as alienated from the written culture of this world as the protagonist is. The man is able to communicate pictographically to locate food and shelter, so it would seem that when essentials are at stake, humans can find ways to engage each other if they so desire. More specifically, these public "failures" are balanced by warm, intimate, private and personal literacies, as when the man writes a letter, folds it into an elaborate bird, and sends it to his family.

The politics of this text are overtly and generally liberal, constituting a critique of violence, totalitarianism, deprivation, and alienation. Those qualities and experiences which ease the protagonist's burdens and which move him further and further from the reach of fear are endorsed by *The Arrival* as socially just. In tracking positive versus problematic experiences throughout the book, however, readers may locate an implicit ideological critique of the very migrant experience so consistently celebrated by the book's surface narrative. The man is welcomed most productively by *other* migrants, who explain quotidian details such as purchasing a ticket for public transport. These fellow migrants also sustain the man literally by sharing food, and symbolically by sharing their own stories of migration.

The migrant protagonist's successful construction of a new life in a new land is marked by his child's experience of locatedness, literacy, and capacity to give directions to other newcomers. The final pages of *The Arrival* show the girl passing confidently through the urban landscape, decoding written language on a storage cupboard, and helping a woman to read a map and the spaces that the map represents. The final plate in the narrative proper shows the young girl pointing to the future and directing her interlocutor on her own way.



The diversity of migrant experiences depicted demonstrates that *The Arrival* privileges empathy over sympathy, and the centrality of migrant experiences reminds readers that contemporary nations such as Australia are necessarily multicultural. Lostness in this book is ameliorated primarily by social relations. It is true that the man learns to read the signs and symbols of his new home, but more important is the process of learning to read other people's stories.

The silences of *The Arrival* are economically and politically strategic. Economically, because they guarantee portability into many and varied cultures / markets; there is little to translate. More saliently, the idealised vision of migrant multiculturalism can be read as politically strategic. Laudable as the narrative trajectory from lostness to locatedness, and the reframing of the child from at-risk to at-home, may be, *The Arrival* tells a story it desires to be true rather than one that may actually be true. This may nonetheless serve as implicit social critique—particularly when juxtaposed with the realism of the various embedded migrant stories. In contrast, *Requiem for a Beast* engages in a more explicit social critique.

### ***Requiem for a Beast: Learning to Remember***

Rather than the stranger in a strange land motif of Tan's story, Ottley tells a story of the protagonist's homeland becoming strange upon his discovery of the extent to which the lives of his nation and his family are founded on hidden violence. Tan's protagonist becomes lost in a new social space, Ottley's loses himself in his perceptions and understandings of a formerly familiar social space. As in *The Arrival*, this protagonist's journey incorporates the voices and stories of other dispossessed or dislocated others. However, where *The Arrival* offers a cohesive and cumulative vision of shared experiences forging a new society, *Requiem* suggests a fragmented palimpsest of untold or repressed stories which disallows a coherent sense of space, society, or self:

He suddenly feels like an alien, like a stranger in a place more barren than he could ever have imagined. He realises that he is not in the country of his father's stories, not the imagined world of his childhood, and is furious at the absolute sophistry of his fantasies. 'Fuck you', he screams and punches the mare's flanks with his spurs.

(Ottley 2007, p. 65)

Although *Requiem for a Beast* is not told in a strictly linear fashion, it follows the experiences of one young Australian man who has grown up in the shadow of a revered father, and has taken as authoritative the stories and scripts conveyed to him by his father and his culture. Metonymically, the stories told by his father enact the wider colonial histories of violence and narrative which comprise contemporary Australia. When the boy cheats to get good school results, and eventually attempts suicide out of fear and shame, he realises that he “wants his own stories” (Ottley 20). He attempts to appropriate his father’s experiences by becoming a stock rider, but it seems that he cannot take up that part of his father’s life without also taking up his father’s complicity in the murder of a young Aboriginal boy. The young man’s journey into the outback to join a stock team, and his eventual refusal to inflict pain on an animal for sport, leads to a recognition of his own need to reconcile his father’s and his nation’s acts of violence rather than to reproduce them.

In addition to the personal stories which are woven into the main narrative of the book, and the religious-musical referents which are used to label sections of the book and as titles for the accompanying musical soundtrack, *Requiem for a Beast* makes self-conscious intertextual use of the Theseus myth. Its main interest in this myth, however, is in its linking of dead children with nation-building rather than in the heroic subjectivity that Theseus might ordinarily exemplify. Remembering his boyhood, the narrator tells of a journey to a museum, a culturally sanctioned site which simultaneously displays and historicises colonial histories of violence. After technological and natural histories, the boy learns of ‘mythology’, and is introduced to the stories of the Centaur and of the Minotaur—the reader, of course, learns along with him (Ottley 2007, pp. 60-61). The boy remembers that, ‘when we got to the mythology room and he read me that story, something extraordinary—something profound—lodged itself inside me’ (p. 60). The Minotaur becomes a flexible metaphor and figure of identification for the protagonist, but also more generally as the beast of history. Hybrid monstrosities of bulls or horses and humans are used to mark visually moments of psychological horror—either in dreams or in visions—at key moments throughout the book, including the culminating scene of violence when the man has to kill a bull in the desert to end its suffering.

Although the mythic narrative is used to figure and punctuate the young man's understanding of himself and his father, and for that matter, the men with whom he goes to work as a stock rider, it is ultimately surrounded and subsumed by the story of an Aboriginal Elder. The first words of *Requiem for a Beast* belong to her, and are repeated at heart of the book: 'It's our memories that make us. This country, these hills you see; this is my mother's country, and her mother's too. I'm supposed to be a fully initiated woman, but that knowledge, that memory, is gone' (Ottley 2007, p. 42). From this, the protagonist learns not to obliterate himself nor his father's actions, but to confront them. Feeling 'the weight of what he wants to say' (p. 79), he realises that he must generate truth in order to move forward. Thus, the key to this young man's growth proves to be not the loss of self in story, but the loss of stories which provide false sense of the self.

Dislocation in *The Arrival* is mainly physical—the migrants carry true stories with them to their new home. In *Requiem*, false stories cause dislocation of the self (as opposed to the body). Just as Tan's protagonist found himself through learning to read, it seems likely that Ottley's protagonist will find himself through learning to remember, and so achieve both senses of requiem: remembrance and rest.

### **Productive Conversations**

Both Tan and Ottley explore the loss of a stable sense of modern national identity, but where Tan offers a return to communities and kinship and affirms desirable myths of multicultural society (of particular but not exclusive relevance in Australia), Ottley critiques unthinking dependence on any narrative which might obscure the ethical interrogation of self or society. Read together, these picture books remind readers that as a settler nation with an Indigenous population as well as a colonial one, Australia cannot ethically privilege utopian relocation narratives such as those offered by *The Arrival* over a consciousness of colonial dislocations such as that foregrounded within *Requiem for a Beast*. As responses to and expressions of the Australian cultural discourse of lostness, then, these two books are individually powerful but especially productive when read in juxtaposition. *The Arrival's* vision of an integrated and welcoming multiculturalism and *Requiem for a Beast's* conflicted attempts at acknowledging the colonial and interpersonal violence which shapes many Australian identities comprise a kind of dialogue about competing meanings of self and place.

As complex examples of the ways in which the Australian anxiety about lostness manifests in the twenty-first century; they not only challenge familiar picture-book conventions of storytelling but also tell stories *about* narrative meaning-making. Approved or privileged subjects in these books are those who are lost or displaced but engage dialogically with their cultural environment, and who learn to read and to remember stories of the familiar made strange. The rather passive lostness which frightened and disabled Dot in the nineteenth century has evolved into complex and active conceptions of lostness as a rite of passage (no longer exclusive to children); an experience which must be endured in order to know the self more fully. As *Requiem for a Beast* concludes:

See those clouds out there? They bring the storm, the battering rain and wind. But the storm is also a nurturing thing, a thing that allows the land and the people to grow again. We all have to stand in the rain, however long it lasts.

(Ottley 2007, p. 81)

In *The Arrival* and *Requiem for a Beast* lostness is transformed from a source of paralyzing anxiety to a productive anxiety: an opportunity to transcend histories of violence and embrace new ways of being, confirming that a re-imagined Australianness ‘does not have to be impossible just because it is contradictory’ (Turner 1994, p. 123). In turn, addressing these challenging works to young readers marks a faith in young Australians as those who can find their own way rather than get lost.

## Notes

1. All these titles were either shortlisted or award-winners within the Children’s Book Council of Australia’s annual Book of the Year awards. *The Arrival* and *Requiem for a Beast* won Picture Book of the Year awards in 2007 and 2008 respectively. The success of these titles suggests a willingness on the part of the CBCA to promote picture books which have an overt social or political perspective, even though this is not the purview of the awards. This tendency has not been without controversy, especially in the case of Ottley’s *Requiem* (see Hateley 2014).

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Erica Hateley is associate professor of English at Sør-Trøndelag University College (Trondheim, Norway). She is interested in issues of gender, literacy, and national identity in contemporary children's literature.