

Fiction Focus Article and Review

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Matt Ottley, talented picture book illustrator, author, painter and musician was born in New Guinea. He moved to Sydney with his family when he was twelve. After leaving school he worked in a variety of jobs and studied Fine Arts, classical guitar and musical composition. Now living in WA, Matt divides his time between painting, writing and composing as well conducting workshops.

Matt's website contains a biography, a list of his picture books and artworks, study notes to support many of his books and information about his music and workshops. His books are available for purchase from the website, including some of the titles that are currently out of print.

The website gives equal weight to his three loves: author, artist and musician. These three talents find full expression in his mysterious and beautiful creation ***Requiem for a Beast***. Matt spent a number of years in outback Queensland as a stockman; time which has no doubt informed the content of his latest work. His experience as an equestrian artist, when he lived in the UK for three years, is also evident in the many drawings of horses that this work contains.

Matt is well known for his books for younger readers, but ***Requiem for a Beast*** breaks entirely new ground with its variety of formats, multiple voices and the inclusion of music for chamber orchestra alongside Aboriginal songs.

Matt is in residence at the Fremantle Children's Literature Centre until early 2008 when the original artwork for ***Requiem for a Beast*** will be on display.

He is writing comprehensive study notes for this title which will be available soon on his website.

Matt is currently working with John Marsden on a new title, ***Home and Away***, to be published in 2008. He is also composing a symphony, which is dedicated to the Fremantle Children's Literature Centre.

Other titles by Matt Ottley:

- ***Please Don't Feed the Animals***, with Brian Mackness, 1985
- ***Albert's Rainy Day***, 1988
- ***What Faust Saw***, 1995
- ***Sailing Home***, with Colin Thompson, 1997
- ***Mrs Millie's Painting***, 1998. *CBCA Notable Picture Book, 1999*
- ***Luke's Way of Looking***, with Nadia Wheatley, 1999. *CBCA Honour Book, Picture Book of the Year, 2000.*
- ***Faust's Party***, 2000. *Shortlist CBCA Picture Book of the Year, 2001*
- ***Hiram and B***, with Brian Caswell, 2003
- ***The Bubble***, with Josie Montano, 2004
- ***Little Penguin, The Life of Eudyptula Minor***, with Josie Montano, 2005. *CBCA Notable Picture Book, 2006*
- ***Faust in Space***, 2006

Matt Ottley's webpage: <http://www.mattottley.com/>

How Requiem came to be ...

Back in 1999, one rainy Sunday afternoon, I wandered into a small country hall in Northern NSW, and joined the audience for a talk given by an elder of the Bundjalung Nation. She was telling the story of her life after she had been taken from her family by the government during the years of the assimilation policies. As she spoke she wept for the mother and father she had never known, and for the sense of not belonging anywhere that she and many like her had grown up with. The only sound accompanying her was the drumming of the rain on the roof, and as I looked around the audience, I could see that some people were struggling to hold back tears, some looked shocked, and all were spellbound. As I listened an idea for the resolution of a new work I'd been thinking about for a long time suddenly fell into place.

Eight years earlier I had been working on a cattle station in far north Queensland. I always kept a sketch book with me in those days. I would store it, along with some pencils and the book I was currently reading, rolled up in my swag. In that sketch book I kept notes and drawings about my life as a stockman, and notes about musical ideas I was having. One particular day, after we had mustered some fairly wild cattle, and yarded them up, I stood in the swirling dust and the heat, and wondered how I could capture a sense of that day in music. The sound of the helicopter (this was one of those really big stations where a helicopter is used to aid in the mustering) was still thrumming

in my head, and there was the odd bleat from a cow or calf, and everything seemed to stand still in the heat. The sound of a harpsichord dropped into my mind; not the trilly, tinkly sound of a baroque harpsichord, but something else, something dissonant and dark. Some four years later, when I began working full time as a creative artist, that sound found its way into a short piece for chamber ensemble called *Allegory of the Bull*. I had planned twelve paintings to go with that piece of music, but only ever completed one. The paintings were to tell the story of the capture of a wild bull, but the story was to be an allegory. It was to be an allegory for the story of the pursuit and subduing of Indigenous culture by earlier generations of European Australians. I couldn't, however, quite resolve my ideas, and I moved on to other books, and the idea lay dormant until that rainy afternoon in 1999.

It was however, to be another couple of years before I began work on the idea that was to become *Requiem for a Beast*. In 2002 I presented an unfinished dummy to Helen Chamberlin from Lothian Books, and within a few weeks I had a contract for the book. It then took me another four and half years to complete both the musical score and book.

Matt Ottley

OTTLEY, Matt. *Requiem for a Beast: a Work for Image, Word and Music.*

Sydney : Lothian Children's, 2007. 90 p.

ISBN 978 0 7344 0796 2

hbk & CD \$39.95

SCIS No: 1324498

Age 15+ This ambitious graphic novel cum picture book expands the already ground-breaking Australian literary boundaries. *Requiem for a Beast* may not become such a universal favourite as Shaun Tan's superlative and multi-award winning *The Arrival*, but it is meritorious in its own right and, incidentally, has taken a similar time period to construct. Deservedly described as confronting, *Requiem for a Beast* is nonetheless conceptually exciting, dangerously beautiful and masterfully illustrated. Its oblique and layered allegories require re-readings, making it an obvious choice for study in the senior secondary English classroom, for tertiary study and for students of art.

A possible interpretation of the content is that the protagonist, a young man who has experienced something very disturbing during the past few years, seems to see an Aboriginal boy threatened by a beast-man. This young man is an inexperienced stockman who is now part of a team on a cattle station in the far north Queensland outback. On a muster, he is inexplicably drawn to follow the bull. He becomes separated from the others and enters an almost dream-like state. Understanding is etched into the reader/viewer throughout the written and visual text but also during this experience. We discover what

has happened to the young man and his father in the past. As part of this journey the young man has been followed by the beast:

What was it that happened that day? Why did that strange beast follow me — out of the museum and into the rest of my life? It hunted me, tracked me through the years and slowly drew my spirit — who I was — from me until there was nothing left. And then four years ago almost took me.

But often through the years, as the beast pursued me, it seemed like something else; something that chased me to the edge of fear, but was beautiful, powerful, desirable but unreachable.

The non-linear written and visual texts create the obfuscating style of disclosure. The artwork is primarily in full colour; in oils and coloured pencils. Some illustrations are 'plates', covering single and double pages and there are many pages with multiple images in more customary graphic novel design. Some are realistic and some surreal. The written text is even less conventional. Several extended slabs of text, like those in ***The Invention of Hugo Cabret*** by Brian Selznick, change the tone and mode of interpretation. And within the written text there is a panoply of styles: a recount in third person; what seem to be the young man's thoughts in first person relayed in Ottley's own handwriting; a female Aboriginal elder's musings in italics; and factual text about mythical beasts — the Centaur and the Minotaur. The book is structured in parts with Latin headings. Latin and Aboriginal languages

feature throughout the book as well as on the accompanying CD of traditional Bundjalung songs and original music by Matt Ottley. These further enhance and explore the allusive title and contents.

Issues of stolen children and genocide of Aboriginal people, including infanticide, are confronting but relevant for study in senior secondary, where this book is best placed because of its complexity, themes and language.

Matt Ottley's early picture book ***Sailing Home*** (with Colin Thompson) first alerted me to his prodigious talent and ***Mrs Millie's Painting*** and ***Luke's Way of Looking*** (with Nadia Wheatley) are personal favourites. Matt Ottley appears to be joining that elite group of Australian illustrators and writers who rival the world's best in literary innovation, execution and vision.

Joy Lawn (QLD)