

*The Voices* by Susan Elderkin (Fourth Estate)

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Well g'day, mate. I guess you don't know who we are, so we'd better sort of introduce ourselves here. We're the voices, the ones Susan Elderkin's new novel is named after, and we guess we're pretty smart, because this must be the first time a novel has had a first person plural narrator. It sort of reminds you of those choruses in Greek dramas, except we don't get to lament and ululate, though we do natter on quite a bit. We're also quite a bit more cute and lovable than those dusty old Greeks, ay, and we're supposed to be dead and very wise, the spirits of the ancestors, that kind of thing.

Anyway, we sort of hang around in the novel, quite literally really, in hammocks much of the time, and we watch what the humans get up to in the Kimberley, which is a remote corner of the Australian outback. When we're not hanging around in our hammocks we float around the little town with the wind. We pretend to find the wind pretty irritating, and he gets sort of pissed off with us too, but you can tell we really like each other from the way we talk to each other, but we can't let on because we must pretend, you know like in movies when Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon bicker all the time but you know they really like each other. It's supposed to make you smile with a lump in your throat. We know about Matthau and Lemmon because we get to watch a lot of telly. And you have to admit it's kind of original, the wind having an argument with a crowd of ghosts lying in hammocks watching telly.

The telly we got from a little spirit girl with whom we also have these pretend-pretend disagreements but we get along just fine really. She's a bit of a Little Orphan Annie, a real little ray of sunshine – not that we need any more sunshine in the outback, but still. We even, in a particularly cute scene, get to watch Cathy Freeman win the Sydney Olympics. No, of course the telly isn't plugged in. We're spirits, remember. Yeah, we know, makes you want to chunder, ay.

Now this Susan Elderkin who's employed us to give, you know, depth and *meaning* to her novel, is a pom really, but she's clearly spent a holiday or two in the outback, and she's done her homework, so her novel's full of mystical stuff to do with the Abos – you know how they're supposed to have this wisdom and all – yeah, of course you know, you read *The Songlines* by that other dicey pom, didn't you?

And you'll have read about the political issues surrounding the "assimilation" of aboriginal children; well, that's all here, spelt out by a professor on television, no less, ay. And you guessed it, the spirit girl – her name is Maisie – is the ghost of a little aboriginal girl who was taken away from her parents way back in the days of assimilation. Yeah, we know, we saw *Beloved* on the telly too.

And of course the other thing the outback has apart from abos is roos, so here you have a lot of those too, and a little boy called Billy who has a thing about roos. We take a special interest in him and talk to him in this cosy pally-paternal way: "Hey Billy. We've been thinking. You don't have to be alone, you know. ... we're always close handy, if you want a bit of a chat. You call and we listen – and vice versa, of course. That's the deal. What do you reckon? You won't ever be alone again."

We never do make out if Billy has accepted our offer or not. Maisie also has a thing about Billy and follows him around everywhere and sings him up. Singing up people is

something we do in the outback; it gives us power over them but tends to mess things up for them, as happens to this Billy, when he takes fright and runs away from the spirit girl and the voices.

When we're not around, which are the best bits of the book, Billy is in hospital, ten years later, badly mutilated with all sorts of scars on his thighs not to mention his wonga, though in fact wongas do come in for quite a bit of mention. The doctors are trying to figure out what happened to him, you know, like in *Life and Times of Michael K*, advanced Western science pitted against the inarticulate wisdom of the earth and not making much sense of it. There's an aboriginal nurse in the hospital who is the only one who really understands what's happened to Billy. And we, of course, on account it was we who mutilated him to set him free. No, don't ask us how it was supposed to do that, it seemed a good idea at the time, ay.

Mainly, reading about us you think the outback is no place for Grumpy Old Men to meet Winnie-the-Pooh. The thing is, Susan is really a very good writer, and doesn't need us mooning around the place. She has a very convincing sense of the arid spaces of the outback, and her human characters are engaging and natural. There's more humour around than you would expect, given the earnestness of much of the novel.

The novel is over-written, with too many writing-school flourishes, but there's enough talent here to overcome that in time as she relaxes into her own voice. She won a Betty Trask award for her first novel, and she's been elected as one of the Granta's Best of the British Young Novelists, so she's clearly going places. That's grand, long as next time it's not Australia, ay.