

'A lush feast of
wit and wisdom.
Writing so rich you
simply want to
devour it.'
Robert Drewe

WINNER OF THE PATRICK WHITE AWARD

CARMEL BIRD FIELD OF POPPIES

Gold, dead bodies, the seeds of global catastrophe –
what lies beneath the poppy field?

READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book [1] About the author [1] Previous Works [2]
Reviews [4] A note from the author [5] Points for discussion [6]
Suggested reading [8] Copyright [9]

About the book

The Big Picture:

Early in the twenty-first century, the world appears to be on the brink of catastrophe. Political and environmental changes and disasters are colluding in the destruction of the planet.

The Comfortable Life:

At the same time many human beings are able to turn a blind eye to the problems, to continue on their merry way, seemingly capable of ignoring the signs of disaster, incapable of action.

Field of Poppies begins by briefly drawing the reader's attention to the bleak facts of the Big Picture, then turns its focus to the finer details of lives in an ordinary rural Australian town. The town itself is perhaps the central 'character' in the narrative, which is told by a tree-changing woman, Marsali.

The mood and texture of these two approaches to the world of the novel are presented in sharply contrasting ways, reflected in the design of the text. The realities of the world at large edge their way into Marsali's consciousness, mostly in regular formal words of wisdom offered by her husband, William. But it is evident that Marsali [and for that matter William and their friends] is unable to deal with the facts and implications of that Big Picture.

Art and Literature are lenses through which Marsali and William try to view the truth, and sometimes the pair seem to glimpse reality, but more often than not it eludes them. Early in the novel their attention is focused on the disappearance and murder of a neighbour, Alice. With this grim reality come even more hideous revelations. The fate of Alice is ultimately revealed, the lives of Marsali and William are changed, but even so, the pair still appears to be blindly and helplessly sleepwalking into total darkness, living the good life, ignoring every warning sign of doom.

About the author

Carmel Bird grew up in Tasmania, and much of her writing reflects this fact. In 2016 she received the Patrick White Literary Award. Carmel is the author of ten novels and eight collections of short fiction. Her books on writing, *Dear Writer Revisited* and *Writing the Story of Your Life* are widely used, as is her anthology of writing from the Stolen Generations, *The Stolen Children – Their Stories*. She published an anthology of a hundred Australian stories written from 1900 to 2000, titled *The Penguin Century of Australian Stories*. She has also published children's books, memoir, and several other anthologies.

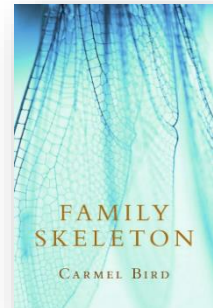
www.carmelbird.com

<https://carmelbird.wordpress.com>

Previous works

Novels

- *Cherry Ripe* [1985]
- *The Bluebird Café* [1990]
- *The White Garden* [1995]
- *Crisis* [1996]
- *Red Shoes* [1998]
- *Unholy Writ* [2000]
- *Open for Inspection* [2002]
- *Cape Grimm* [2004]
- *Child of the Twilight* [2010]
- *Family Skeleton* [2016]



Collections

- *Dimitra* [1976]
- *Births, Deaths and Marriages* [1983]
- *The Woodpecker Toy Fact and Other Stories* [1987]
- *Woodpecker Point* [1988]
- *The Common Rat* [1993]
- *Automatic Teller* [1996]
- *The Essential Bird* [2005]
- *The Dead Aviatrix* [2017]
- *My Hearts Are Your Hearts* [2015]



Non-fiction

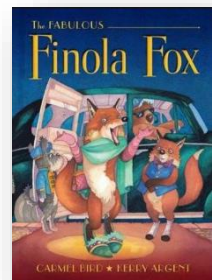
- *Dear Writer.* [1988]
- *Not Now Jack - I'm Writing a Novel.* [1994]
- *Dear Writer* [Revised and enlarged ed.] [1996]
- *Writing the Story of Your Life* [2010]
- *Dear Writer Revisited* [2013]
- *Fair Game* [2015]



Previous works [continued]

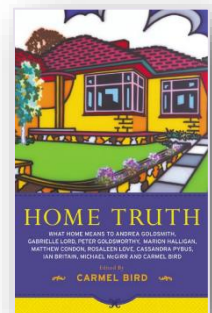
Children's

- *The Mouth* [1996]
- *The Cassowary's Quiz* [1998]
- *Fabulous Finola Fox* [2012]



Anthologies Edited by Carmel Bird

- *Australian Short Stories* [1991]
- *Red Hot Notes* [1996]
- *Daughters and Fathers* [1997]
- *The Stolen Children* [1998]
- *Penguin Century of Australian Stories* [2000]
- *Home Truth* [2010]



Reviews

'How to describe *Field of Poppies*? A lush feast of wit and wisdom? Writing so rich you simply want to devour it? A forensic examination of an Australian country town? Literary tour de force will have to do.'

Robert Drewe [author of *Whipbird*, and *The True Colour of the Sea*]

'All the Bird trademark strands – beauty, shock and horror, a genuine story based in the reality of the world, complex imagery, elegant irony and compelling prose.'

Gabrielle Lord [author of the *Conspiracy 365* series and the *Gemma Lincoln* series]

'*Field of Poppies* is an absolute feast of wit and wisdom. Carmel Bird embroiders a seemingly simple story with the most wonderful observations and colourful mischief. This novel resonates with a long list of contemporary problems. It does so using humour, not anger. It is fun - wry, intelligent, searching, poised and astute. It showcases the human catastrophe with grace and charm. It takes years of experience for a writer to be able to pull off this kind of sorcery. It is wonderful to see Carmel Bird working with such zest and verve.'

Michael McGirr [author of *Books That Saved My Life* and *Things You Get for Free*]

'Sharp yet sensitive, wildly imaginative, and layered with allusion and allegory. Bird's vivid characters weave together local legend, small-town speculation, art, literature and science in their narration of their selves and lives, all but ignoring the social and ecological destruction taking place around them. A truly remarkable achievement from a novelist at the height of her powers.'

Fiona Wright [author of *The World Was Whole* and *Small Acts of Disappearance: Essays in Hunger*]

'Bold and playful, sharply funny and humane, Carmel Bird's timely social satire shimmers with layers. She has a gift for distilling the essence of her characters and locations and bringing them together in wonderfully unexpected ways. Her distinctive voice and lightness of touch shine in this penetrating and evocative novel.'

Michael Sala [author of *The Restorer* and *The Last Thread*]

'Highly engaging storytelling that blends and layers reality and extravaganza with ingenious irony, wit and subtlety.'

Gerardo Rodriguez Salas [author of *Aesthetic Construction of the Female Grotesque in Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf. A Study of the Interplay of Life and Literature*]

A note from the author

A friend went to a gallery where she bought a fancy hair clip, which she gave to me. The image on the hair clip was 'Woman with a Parasol', one of Claude Monet's many depictions of his wife.



I went on a little Monet spree, and naturally I came to 'Field of Poppies in Argenteuil'. Sometimes it is easy enough to explain how and why an event is the inspiration for a piece of fiction, however I can't really say why 'Poppies' set my imagination in motion, but it did.

Suddenly I had a character who loved, not just that painting, but a faithful copy of it, created by her aunt. The main figure of the woman in 'Poppies' is probably the same woman as the one with the parasol. For that matter, she's carrying a parasol in 'Poppies' too. Before I knew it, I was writing about the poppies in Flanders, about the waste and horror of war, leading me on to meditate on the ravages that humans have visited upon the planet itself. Yet as I descended into the bewildering darkness of wars, refugees, climate, disease, overcrowding, starvation, thirst, extinctions – I saw all around me people who lead cheerful, comfortable Australian lives, playing sport, going to the opera, the café, the art gallery, flying to Paris, decorating their hair with fancy clips. The novel was beginning to take shape.

I am daily reminded of the urgency needed to attend to looming global disaster. Marsali and William are intended to foreground the dangers inherent in blithely living in a kind of fairyland. At one level, they *know* everything is spinning out of control; at another level they are powerless to act. The ground beneath their feet is rich in gold that will betray them, and also seeded with the bones of historic tragedies and massacres. Such things are still happening around them.

It's ironic of course that something as innocent and sweet as the fancy hairclip should have set all this in motion.

For discussion

- Tree-changers are often people with the freedom to seek out their own personal 'lifestyle'. Briefly explain how this all works out for Marsali and William.
- The third section of the novel is titled 'The Mine'. What is the significance and role of gold in the text?
- So many elements of this novel are steeped in irony. Discuss.
- Marsali tells the story in an informal, memoirist tone. She is articulate, privileged, judgmental, sociable, likeable. Yet her view of the world is skewed, and much of what she says reveals an inability to face reality. Discuss
- In which ways is William the novel's centre of wisdom and goodness?
- The title of the novel references World War One. The wars of the 20th Century are part of the background fabric of the novel, which frequently descends into moments of ugly violence. Discuss
- History, geography, mining – discuss the roles of these within the narrative.
- The town of Muckleton is central to the story, as is the general area of the old goldfields. Discuss.
- In contrast to the more or less charmed lives of Marsali and William, are the dysfunctional lives of Saffron and Tonto. Discuss.
- The churches of Muckleton play a key role in the life of the community. Discuss.
- Generally speaking, the people of Muckleton are of good will, and some of their antics give rise to comedy. Discuss.
- The murder of Alice is a grotesque, careless, alcohol-fuelled act. It is also emblematic, within the novel's fabric, of human stupidity, and inattention to the plight of the planet. Discuss.
- How do the various literary works discussed in the text contribute to the central concerns of the novel?
- What is the role of Monet's painting 'Field of Poppies'?
- What does Marsali's obsession with and analysis of Monet's painting tell you about Marsali herself?
- Consider the epigraphs at the beginning of the novel. Discuss these in relation to your reading of the text.
- The poppy as a signifier of sleep is foregrounded in the novel, while the scarlet poppy of Flanders flags the bloodshed and tragedy of human conflict. Consider how the novel plays with these two meanings of the poppy.

For discussion [continued]

- Do you think that the couple, with their baby, who set up their b&b in the house vacated by Marsali and William, are a marker of hope for humanity?
- Do you think the novel suggests that Marsali and William will ever be punished in some way for their wealthy, careless, carefree lives?
- Marsali and William both belong to reading groups. These are quite different from each other. Discuss.

Suggested reading

The White Garden – Carmel Bird [University of Queensland Press, 1995]

Red Shoes – Carmel Bird [Vintage, 1998]

Cape Grimm – Carmel Bird [Harper Perennials, 2004]

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland – Lewis Carroll [Penguin Random House, 2008 (1865)]

Picnic at Hanging Rock – Joan Lindsay [Penguin, 1975 (1967)]

The Dry – Jane Harper [Pan Macmillan, 2016]

Soon – Lois Murphy [Transit Lounge, 2017]

Field of Poppies

Carmel Bird

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