

# Tales for a Dry Country

Virginia Lowe

Venero Armanno and Anna Pignataro

*The Very Super Adventures of Nic and Naomi*

Lothian, \$24.95hb, [32]pp, 0 7344 0315 1

Gary Crew and Bruce Whatley

*Quetta*

Lothian, \$24.95hb, [32]pp, 0 7344 0240 6

Mem Fox, illus. Tricia Tusa

*The Magic Hat*

Scholastic, \$24.95hb, [32]pp, 1 86504 462 8

Leigh Hobbs

*Old Tom's Holiday*

ABC Books, \$25.95hb, [32]pp, 0 7333 1073 7

Penny Matthews, illus. Andrew McLean

*A Year on Our Farm*

Omnibus Books, \$24.95hb, [32]pp, 1 86291 441 9

**D**ESPITE THE EXHORTATIONS of my Grade Two teacher, I continued to cover my picture 'A Rainy Day' with diagonal white lines. I thought the effect of the white pastel on the black paper was particularly fetching, imparting a realistic mistiness to the raincoated and booted figure beneath. There is something magical about rain in this dry continent; rainy pictures reinforce this.

The dryness of the country is celebrated in *A Year on Our Farm*. By November the farm's dam is already dry. (I have to take issue with this — is there anywhere in Australia where it is so dry in spring? In southern Australia, at least, the hottest and driest months are January and February.) On the page for June, there is a wonderfully evocative picture of rain and mud, and the sheer enjoyment of working outside in them.

*A Year on Our Farm* is also very Eurocentric, in that all the animals and plants are exotic. There is not a single magpie or possum to be seen, though there is a parrot (a rosella, it looks like). Perhaps the book is designed so that it can be easily adapted for a northern hemisphere readership. However, one of the difficult things for people from that hemisphere to appreciate is the subtlety of the season changes here in Australia, and this book could have helped with that. Nevertheless, this is a splendid picture book, a celebration of farm

life, wonderful for toddlers learning the names of familiar farm animals, and older children learning the names of the months and seasons. It will be enjoyed and pored over.

There is another wonderful, if irrelevant, rainy picture in *The Very Super Adventures of Nic and Naomi*. This is Australian in a special way. It celebrates the diversity of our suburbs, where the rich and less well-off live side by side. On the day that Naomi moves into the little falling-down weatherboard house with her mother, Nic turns up and greets her with the information that the house is known to be haunted. The two girls cement their friendship with the fastest run — much faster than anyone else in their street. Rabbit Street is lined with big trees and full of children. The pictures display a range of interesting perspectives. The underlying message that, whatever your financial and family status, you can be friends is firmly established. Some of the pictures of the two girls running are most evocative; the speed is well indicated in the blurry lines. Some, however, are less satisfying: the one where the wind is obviously behind them, blowing their hair forward as they run, looks rather unnatural. Still, this is a lovely evocation of the suburbs at their best, and an environment as familiar to most city children as the farm is to most country kids.

There is no domestic familiarity in *Old Tom's Holiday*. Old Tom accompanies Angela Throgmorton on the world trip she has won. While she is not at first aware of him, readers enjoy spotting Old Tom or his security fishbone. He stays hidden from Angela until her penultimate lonely day, when he suddenly appears, and they enjoy the rest of the trip together. There is no rain here, but London is appropriately misty. The backgrounds are soft swirly watercolours, making a wonderful foil for the strong black lines of the protagonists, Old Tom and Angela. Hobbs's line drawings are impeccable, free and amusing. The humour of Old Tom, the loved but lazy tyrant (true of all cats), lies in his being the bane yet also the making of Angela's life, and this relationship is an amusing allegory for so many marriages. Old Tom is the substitute husband, although it is 'Baby' that Angela usually calls him.

Although there was no storm when the *Quetta* was shipwrecked, the black-and-white pictures of passengers fighting for their lives in the sea, even staying afloat by clutching at dead sheep, are very moving. Gary Crew's best-known work is still his novel about the wreck of the *Batavia*, titled *Strange Objects*; this equally true story of the *Quetta* lacks the overtones of cruelty and despair. A little girl is the sole survivor of the thirty children on board the *Quetta* when it goes down. She is rescued from the sea by Mutassa, a Ceylonese boy, who becomes devoted to her but has no money. There is a custody case, since no one has claimed her. Captain Brown, who lives where the survivors came ashore, wants to adopt her and has money, a wife and no children of his own. So he is granted custody. Shipwrecks and drowned children were an often-repeated aspect of our history. The custody battle over little 'Quetta' is a sad, true story. Whether this book will help or distress children who have gone through this trauma themselves remains to be seen. Either way, they should benefit from seeing that it has happened before. The paintings are a change for Bruce Whatley — fascinating mock-collages on many openings, a good way of getting a lot of factual information across painlessly.

In many ways, *The Magic Hat* is the opposite. Fox's extravaganza is over-the-top fantasy, rather like Dr Seuss in its zany but strictly metred and rhymed verse, and its 'chantability'. The magic hat changes whatever it lands on into some kind of appropriate animal, until right at the end when it changes the giant wizard into a little boy — from whose pretend game it must have emerged. The boy has a wonderful imagination, and so does Tricia Tusa, who records all the ridiculous events delightfully, in carefree watercolour washes. Young children will delight in finding the rhyming word to chant as the page is turned: the grumpy old man who is changed into 'a warty old toad', the mother who becomes a kangaroo, even the woman hanging out her washing who becomes a giraffe. Light-hearted and wacky, this book will be loved by many.