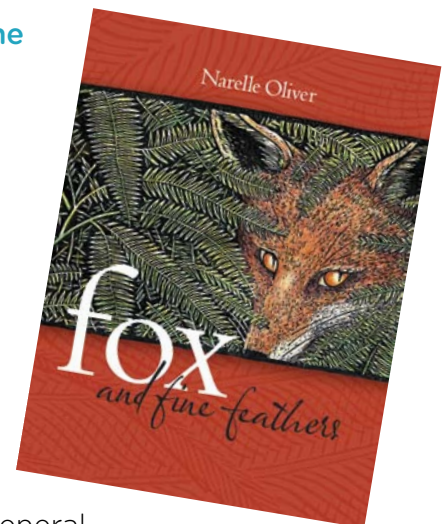


Interview with Narelle Oliver

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Joy Lawn spoke to Narelle Oliver on the occasion of the launch of her new book, 'Fox and Fine Feathers'

Know the author/illustrator: Narelle Oliver



'Fox and Fine Feathers', the latest picture book by Narelle Oliver was recently launched by the Governor-General.

In acknowledgement of the esteem in which artist and author, Narelle Oliver, is held by the Australian and international public and the children's literature and education communities, Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, launched Narelle's latest picture book, 'Fox and Fine Feathers'.

The launch was held at St Aidan's Anglican Girls' School in Brisbane to a packed auditorium of guests, including fellow authors and illustrators and members of the Children's Book Council of Australia and Book Links. The Governor-General delivered a heart-felt speech, describing Narelle as her 'very favourite author, artist and illustrator' and how 'Fox and Fine Feathers' and 'Home', both by Narelle, are her favourite books. The Governor-General even diverted from her speech to share some of the illustrations from both these books which she was particularly captivated by. Her complete speech can be read at www.gg.gov.au

A retrospective of Narelle's twenty year career was then held as a conversation between Narelle and Joy Lawn, commentator on children's and young adult literature. A stunning slide-show which highlighted pertinent illustrations from Narelle's books during the conversation informed and delighted the audience.

Some images from this can be viewed at Narelle's website at www.narelleoliver.com

Interview of Narelle Oliver by Joy Lawn:

Narelle, most people probably think of you as an illustrator. Your artistic vision and techniques are apparent from the beginning of your career. They show innovation in concept and execution. But your written text is also very strong. Do you see yourself as an author as much as an illustrator?

Narelle: My interest in creating picture books has always involved conceptualizing the story and then working with both words and pictures to tell that story. The relationship between words and pictures which occurs in picture books and also in film - how both can work together giving different parts of the narrative, or against each other as different points of view of the narrative - is particularly intriguing to me.

For example, in each of my picture books, 'The Hunt' and 'Home' the story is told through two points of view and it is the disparity between the two viewpoints which provides the interest. In each of these picture books, the written text tells the story from the point of view of the bird who is the main character. According to the written text in 'The Hunt', the Tawny Frogmouth's prey are vanishing, one after the other. However, on close inspection of each illustration, the reader can see that the prey are cleverly camouflaging. The written text in 'Home' is told from the viewpoint of a Peregrine Falcon from the bush. His description of the city buildings as 'cliffs' and a boat with oars as 'a creature with many legs' is counterpointed by the images of the actual cityscapes. In his book 'Words and Pictures', Quentin Blake explains that the French have a word for this disparity, *decalage*, and that he has built some of his picture books around that concept.¹ As Martin Salisbury adds, 'it (*decalage*) allows the child to be thrilled or amused by being in on the joke, the reader of the words presenting one reality while the pictures give another'.²

The completion of the illustrations certainly dominates the final written text in terms of how much time is needed (and also space on the page). However, over the course of creating twelve picture books over a period of twenty years, and working with two very good editors in that time (Helen Chamberlin at Lothian Books, and Dyan Blacklock at Omnibus Books) - I have become more and more aware of what words work well in the text of a picture book - and just as importantly - what is better left out of the written text and shown in the illustrations.

You seem to have created a whole sub genre of natural history picture books with a strong artistic style and design, celebrating Australian natural history. Your books are often a melding of non-fiction and fiction. Can you explain your vision and vocation?



Narelle: I began my first picture book, 'Leaf Tail' in the mid-1980s. At that time, I was a teacher of young hearing-impaired students and I used picture books every day in my classroom. The Australian picture books of that era often featured Australian animals – and were beautifully illustrated. However, I felt that they were showing just the tip of the iceberg – usually focusing on the same very well-known Australian animals such as possums, wombats, kangaroos and koalas – and always in human situations. Since early childhood – when I spotted a Tawny Frogmouth looking like nothing more than a broken branch on my auntie's farm, I have been fascinated by the ingenious adaptations of native animals to their surroundings. This interest developed further when I studied biology and discovered Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection – and then further through my husband, Greg, who had studied Environmental Science and was working for the National Parks and Wildlife Service and with whom I was exploring many natural Australian landscapes and discovering a vast array of creatures, such as the Leaf-tailed Gecko, and their amazing adaptive features.

I am a great believer in 'story' and I did not want to write a straight information book with facts and pictures of these animals and their habitats. I had a gut feeling that the adaptive features of these creatures (camouflage, or beak shapes or burrowing underground etc) would provide problem-solution scenarios which might underpin effective story plots. And in the meantime, introduce some of the less-well-known Australian creatures to children.

At the same time, I was exploring printmaking – and in particular – linoprinting – and its particular strengths in terms of emphasizing shapes, textures and patterns. I had studied printmaking and design at teachers' college, but I continued to study printmaking at various Summer schools during my school holidays – harbouring a secret

desire to be a full-time printmaker one day. Because many adaptive animal features rely on their design, shape, texture and pattern, this medium seemed perfectly suited to my story ideas.

By a stroke of sheer luck, Irena Sibley (Melbourne-based printmaker, author, illustrator) was conducting a two-week workshop in Toowoomba, Queensland as part of the MacGregor Summer School at the University of Southern Qld. in 1985. One of the requirements of this course was to bring the text of a picture book. This forced me to write the text of 'Leaf Tail' and I worked on some of the illustrations, in linocut, with her guidance. Four years later, (and many, many re-workings of both text and illustrations), my first picture book 'Leaf Tail' , featuring a Leaf-Tailed Gecko and his quest to find a safe place in the rainforest, was published by McCulloch Publishing, Melbourne.

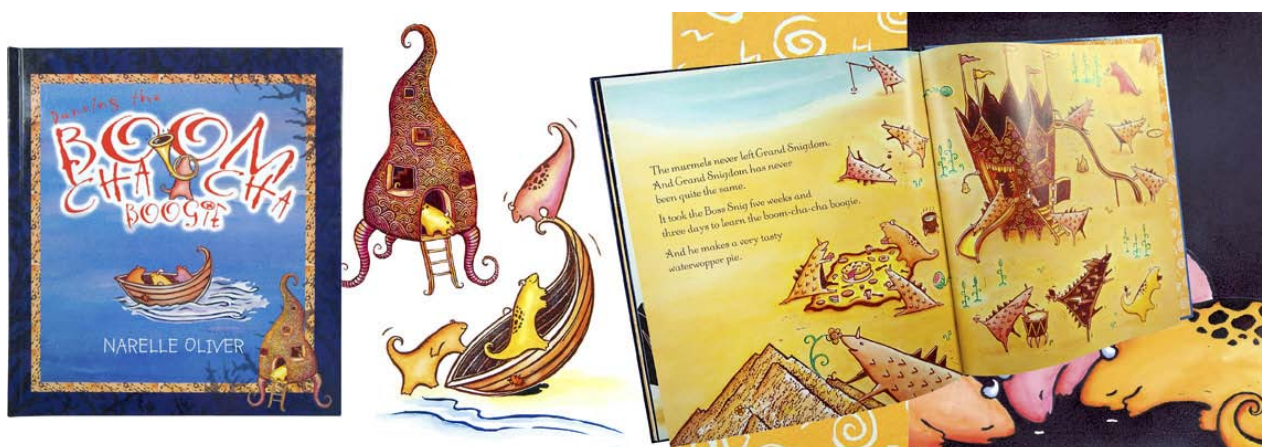
As well as your signature natural history books, you do have exceptions. What are these, and what have been your motivations for creating them?



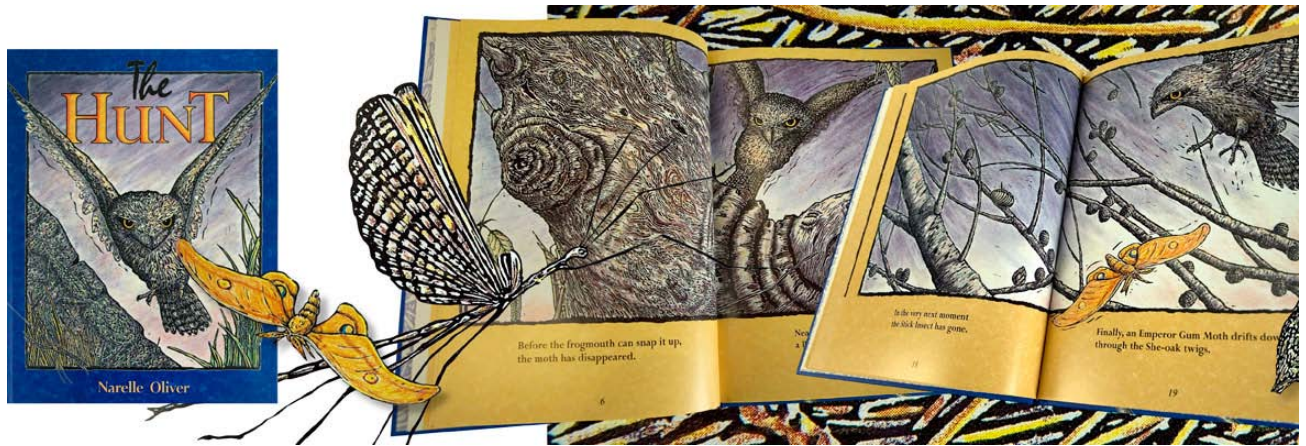
Narelle: My first departure from a natural history-based picture book was 'Mermaids Most Amazing'. By chance, I had discovered a very old book called 'Sea Enchantress' which detailed stories and 'facts' about mermaids and mermen throughout history and across many countries and cultures. I was shocked at the richness of the subject, the variety of their appearances, and the accounts of real sightings and captures through history. To my mind, 'mermaids' had been appropriated as a very 'girly' subject in current children's picture books, often presented, nip-waisted and Barbie-style, between glittery pink covers effectively excluding most young boys as readers. And so, I aimed to enthrall both boys and girls with a culturally and historically rich variety of mermaids and mermen (the real, the mythical, the fake, the weird, the wonderful, and the downright ugly) in my collection of stories and 'facts' in 'Mermaids Most Amazing'

Two picture books featuring imaginary creatures followed 'Mermaids Most Amazing'. The first of these, 'The Very Blue Thingamajig' is a story for very young children incorporating the language of mathematics. Since my early teaching days with hearing-impaired children and their language difficulties, I had always been aware of how important language was to the grasping of mathematical concepts – the concept of 'each' and 'groups of' as underpinning the concept of multiplication, for example. My underlying hope with this picture book, apart from providing a fun story with a satisfying ending, was to introduce some of this language (and its associated understanding of groups) in a fun, visual way before the real expectation of learning times-tables sets in. Following this was 'Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie', a story which is based on two different species of imaginary creatures – the Snigs and the Murmels – and what happens when three homeless Murmels arrive on Grand Snigdom and, despite being thrown in prison for being different and a perceived threat to the Snigs' sea slug industry, introduce their special foods, dances and games.

This story was primarily a response to my admiration of a newly-arrived Sudanese family who moved in to a house two doors from us. Each Sunday, the family walked proudly up our street in traditional dress, and after school, the children played happily in the street – with very few material possessions. Despite me thinking Australia had offered them such a safe wonderful environment, I was amazed at their cultural pride, joy in simple pleasures, and the strong family focus they brought with them – there were many things for me and my family to learn from how they lived. And so it was with the three young homeless Murmels – offering the riches of their culture to the powerful, but culturally-impooverished Snigs.



Is there international interest in any of your books?



Narelle: From my experience, there is often some reservation by international publishers to buy the rights of an Australian book which has a very 'regional' flavour. Perhaps that is the downside of creating picture books which capture the essence of very Australian landscapes and animals.

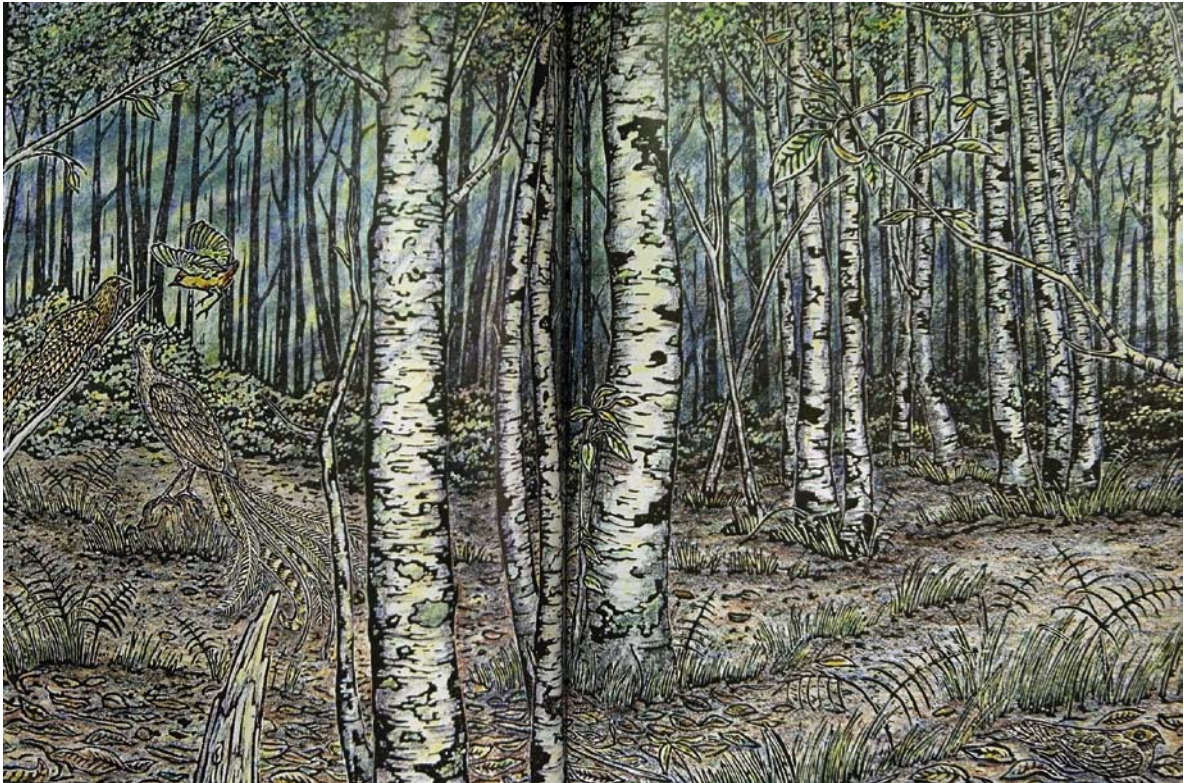
Regarding my natural-history books, 'The Best Beak in Boonaroo Bay' has a US edition (Fulcrum Publishing) due, in no small part, to the fact that the birds in this book also exist in North America.

In 2003, a New York-based publisher, Star Bright Books, contacted me. They had been selling small quantities of my picture book, 'The Hunt', and thought that the concept of the book was a good one. However, they felt that sales had been compromised because the main character - a Tawny Frogmouth - was unknown in the United States. The publisher offered to pay my way to the US to conduct a research trip if I was able to produce a similar book using North American landscape, plants and animals. In 2004, I undertook this trip and stayed with friends in Southern Illinois who had told me about the camouflage abilities of their resident Screech Owl and whose property also boasted the oak-hickory forest and remnant prairie I needed for the story. They also kindly arranged for me to visit an owl rescue centre so that I could see and photograph the range of owls I needed close-up. In September, 2007, 'Twilight Hunt' was published in the United States.

My picture book, 'Mermaids Most Amazing', being quite multi-cultural in flavour, and including a story of a native American mermaid, has a US edition. (G.P Putnam's Sons)

'The Very Blue Thingamajig' has a Korean edition.

In your latest book, 'Fox and Fine Feathers', you have created the setting of the Coachwood forest so well that I feel I can just walk into it. The settings of your natural history-based books capture the essence and integrity of the landscapes in which they are set. Can you comment on the importance of the setting, and how you achieve this feeling for the reader of being there?



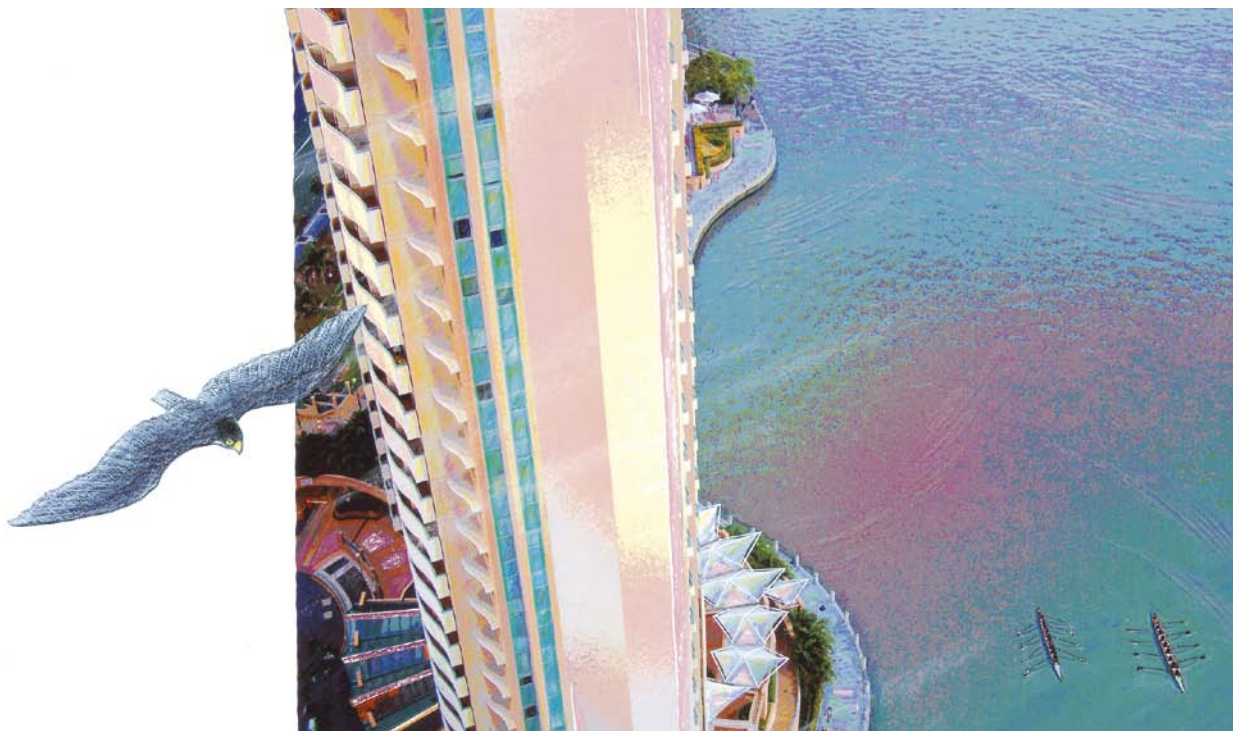
Narelle: In my natural history-based picture books, settings are extremely important and are usually pivotal to the plot. In addition, I am only motivated to create a picture book after experiencing the landscape first-hand and knowing it (and feeling it) very well – right down to what the leaf litter looks and smells like. I once heard a reviewer describe the setting of a Tim Winton novel as one of the characters. That is how I would love readers to think of the settings I have used in my picture books – the mangrove swamp in 'The Best Beak in Boonaroo Bay', the stony and sandy deserts and Spinifex plains in 'Sand Swimmers' and 'Baby Bilby, where do you Sleep?' and the Coachwood forest in 'Fox and Fine Feathers'. The setting of 'Fox and Fine Feathers' is the Border Ranges area – an ecologically rich and diverse region which straddles the Qld – NSW border. It is quite a unique area in terms of flora and fauna – the blending of southern temperate and northern subtropical habitats makes for a wide variety of forests and an abundance of animal life with over 170 species of birds, many of which are rare or threatened. As a young child, my

family stayed at Binnaburra Lodge in this region every year and I feel like I know that Coachwood forest with its giant buttressed Strangler Figs like the back of my hand. In later years, I have done quite a lot of walking in nearby Springbrook National Park and still delight in coming across a secluded ferny rockpool in the middle of the white-barked Coachwoods.

Australia has a diversity of unspoilt natural landscapes and I am hoping that my books will instil positive feelings about these places in young Australian readers. I think that a personal feeling and knowledge of a landscape is critical to developing a desire to preserve that landscape.

In terms of capturing that landscape in my illustrations, I would hope that my intimate knowledge of place (through many visits, and use of hundreds of photos I have taken of every aspect of the landscape) is what helps me to create it with authenticity in the illustrations. (Apart from plenty of re-drawing to get the perspective right!)

As Narelle invites us into her worlds, we can see where some of her own journey has taken her as we celebrate her new book and her body of work so far. There have been developments in Narelle's content and style throughout her books but she is singular in having reached peaks early in her career, and these continue. Narelle takes us with her from the seeming minutiae of life on the ground (and under it) to the soaring heights.



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The Very Blue Thingamajig (2003) Omnibus Books (Scholastic)

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