

## Possum Hunt

By Jane Downing

**T**here was one journalist the first day. The possum looked him squarely in the eye. “You pillock,” it said. “What are you doing here? I’m a rumour and there are so many important stories to cover. Bugger off back to the Big Smoke.”

The world was hungry for something piquant, even picaresque, to distract it from the biggest story of the past year and the small online article went, well, there was no other word for it—viral.

There were five journalists and bloggers the next day. Interest grew exponentially, but after the first appearance, the possum refused to come out of its hollow in the ironbark. He shouted his assessments from within. Some were newsworthy, most nonsensical.

“What is there to do now the fires are out?”

“Don’t trust anyone with nowhere left to run.”

Audio files accompanied the blurry footage beamed across space. The possum’s voice was exactly what the world expected from an arboreal marsupial. Deep and raspy. Australians looked to their ceilings and imagined the intruders in the cavity breaking off from nocturnal grunting to tell them off for their long showers and excessive eating.

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of its audience, “haven’t you anything better to do? Read Voltaire. Read Wittgenstein. Read. Anything. You plonkers.”

A lemonade stand popped up near the possum tree on the third day. A young girl sold refreshments by the disposable plastic cup. The sign advertising an exorbitant price was homemade, the lemonade was not. A lollygagger sneaking into the bush for a wee, saw a rising pyramid of Homebrand two-litre cordial bottles. Didn’t have time to compose a tweet, had no

coverage to send it even if he had. The bull ant bites sent him on his way.

Meanwhile, the girl told her customers, “We have a lemon tree. I’m up at dawn squeezing. Have to strike while the iron is hot. Who knows when Bernard will stop talking?”

He never stopped according to the locals. The world’s attention simply shifted. There was a crab who could draw, an octopus who could predict the outcome of elections, rats re-enacting *The Gangs of New York* scene by scene.

After the listicles of facts about possums, the articles about other famous Bernards, the scientific commentary on humanity’s desire to believe in the supernatural and the less generous memes on gullibility, after the opinion pieces and the opinion pieces about the opinion pieces, Bernard’s tree was suddenly alone in the forest and that old conundrum about noises in forests with no-one to hear them couldn’t have been more relevant.

And that’s where I came in. Just one of the millions who’d taken the clickbait; the one who wanted to know more once the circus had moved on. If I could only meet Bernard and get his complete opinions on humanity’s obsessions, his reach could go way beyond soundbites. The anachronist in me visualised a book. Hardback. Hefty. A tome was what they called them in the old days.

There was nothing on the traditional accommodation sites like Airbnb so I had to search deeper on the net for somewhere to stay

in the town near Bernard’s forest. I even had to use the telephone to make a booking at The Elms Motel.

Internet coverage didn’t get out to their *neck of the woods*, a woman’s voice explained. “Yes we do have a vacancy dear. How long? That long? Even at the height of the possum magic we only had short stays. Didn’t they just hate the idea of a WiFi free room.”

There were complicated arrival arrangements about what bell to ring between what hours. If I’d wanted to research a novel set last century, I was coming to the right spot.

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The UHT milk in the motel fridge tasted like it’d been sieved through the sock of a long distance runner. I put my cup of tea aside and spread out my documentation, downloaded and printed photos from the numerous news reports. I examined them minutely to situate myself in the lie of the land. The ironbark tree that served as Bernard’s abode was long dead but still beautiful, and distinctive. With the struggling sun as my compass I began my search, leaving the manicured grounds and heading north along a well-worn track out of the one-pub town. I was waved off by the motel owner, an octogenarian with reading glasses hanging on a chain at bust level.

“Watch for snakes,” was her only advice.

The grey day did not get any brighter. Drifts of fog loitered between the trees. After ten minutes trudging in my new country boots there

was a fork in the road, as there often is in life. And as is my way, I took the wrong turn. Which was to the right. I can verify this as I recorded everything in the notebook I carried at all times. When I am tempted to conflate the coming days into one epic quest to create a compelling narrative, I know the reality is a touchstone away in pages as leather-bound as my rural boots.

The path to the right, and I was ultimately to discover, the one to the left also, became spongy the deeper I went into the forest. Decades of debris from stringybarks, paperbarks, brittle gums, the occasional river red as the pathways intersected with Daisy Bed Creek, were composting underfoot. Ironbarks retain their bark through their life but they had contributed leaves and blossom dust.

These native trees stood at an acceptable social distance from each other, but it wasn't straightforward to pass between them because of a dense and uninviting understory of ferns and brush and bushes rarely mentioned when invoking The Bush. I had not expected them: the representations of art are often stronger than any difficult understory. I pushed on. The fog swirling around eventually rose but it remained a "soft" day holding onto rain that never fell. It was deep winter by any calculation, which explained all the mushrooms, the ones rippling like ballerina tutus, those that glowed as iridescent as a lava lamp.

As it turned out, one dead tree looks much like another and when I returned to the

nondescript motel room after more than three hours I was feeling discouraged. Only an intersecting fire trail had saved me. Bernard had not called out any helpful directions.

No internet. And no mobile phone coverage once out of cooee of town. The culture shock of silence.

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To cut a long story short—to edit my desired book to an extract—on the second day I found the right tree. A young girl stepped out from between the silvery trunks of a stand of gums, the reification of the McCubbin print, *Lost*, as displayed on the wall in the motel's breakfast bar. I recognised an entrepreneur when I saw one. Mainly from the screen and stills during the brief notoriety of the area. Her lemonade stand was gone, but I had found my guiding hand.

"Are you lost?" she asked.

"No, you are the lost child of art," I said, so used to being in my own head the words accidentally slipped out.

The blonde waif looked askance the way children do at the indecipherable world. She was elfish with long flyaway hair that covered her ears so there was no way of verifying the essence of elfishness. We only later got to the beginnings of acquaintance, the normal exchange of names and motivations. She was Alice. At that later stage I gave my name truthfully as Desley Coward, and she asked, "Like a person who runs away when things get tough?" I was immediately back in the schoolyard—somewhere this child should have

been that day. I'd had no friends and the bullying had been intense. At a young age I took to carrying a copy of Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* in my blazer pocket for legitimacy and proof of lineage.

Luckily, by the time my guide asked my name she could see I was the opposite of its meaning. No coward would have agreed to follow her deeper into The Bush.

Back at the beginning she'd asked a different question. "Are you here to find Bernard or the regent honeyeater?" I acknowledged the first. "This way then."

Guide Alice volubly filled the coming hour with revelations. "There are ringtail and brushtail possums. Bernard is a brushtail, and a very fine one he has too. He is a little bit vain about it. I told him his name should be Basil." I didn't laugh. "But he insists it is Bernard."

Second to Bernard, her gossip was about herself. "My father is on sabbatical to research the nesting habits of the regent honeyeater. Possums eat bird's eggs so he was never a fan and then Bernard's fans disrupted data collection and contaminated the habitat. It's put his work back by years."

"And you live near here? With him?" I prompted.

"Not with Bernard, silly. Me and my dad have a caravan." Her hand waved regally in a direction it'd be impossible to follow.

Her feet were more directed. Sure enough, we eventually stood at the bottom of *the* ironbark, a

tree dead yet teeming with life. Just above head height from where one branch had let go and shattered to the ground, was a hole. The recess was dark. For all the world as if it was empty.

"Oi, Bernard, you coming out today?" the child hailed.

Nothing.

She turned to me. "He'll be assessing you."

"Do I look trustworthy?" I wondered.

"Not for me to say."

In anticipation we stared silently, united.

Alice was clearly not comfortable with silence. "You could climb up if you were skinnier."

This was the first argument I'd heard for losing weight which had traction. "Do you go up?" I asked, ignoring her implicit judgement.

"Yes. Bernard does like a talk. Did you see YouTube? He knows stuff. He has opinions. My father does not see to my education so I must as needs must."

Was she quoting a mother currently missing from the picture or the scientist father himself? I didn't ask. Bernard was my sole goal.

"Can you ask him to come out?"

A growl, like a strong wind through resistant branches, surrounded us. I turned away. I turned back. She was gone. As if she'd been a figment of my imagination. I did not record my emotion in my notebook: the coldness of fear needs to be cosseted into forgetfulness. Instead I retreated, leaving a Hansel and Gretel trail so I could find my way back the next day. The only thing I had handy in my raincoat pocket was an open packet

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of Fantales, small squares of caramel covered in chocolate and snippets of celebrity gossip. One day, if my book sold well, Bernard could himself find such lasting fame on a Fantale wrapper.

The trees crowded in, then suddenly opened up onto the main road into town. My guide had negotiated a charge for her services calculated by the hour or parts thereof. She’d had me on a wild goose chase, hunting possums in circles for the full hour. I was back in my motel room in ten minutes.

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An interview with the publican in town that night went better. It was a quiet night. Farmers from the surrounding properties talked canola and wheat along the bar, vintners from the vineyards clustered at tables, noses twitching to the cornucopia of smells outside their training.

The extent of agriculture surrounding the town suggested that the sun did sometimes shine bright in the district. That night, however, the rain drummed on the iron roof above. My Riesling came at room temperature. A crisp frostiness.

“Did you ever see Bernard?” I asked my host.

Frisbee Brown leant one hand on the draft beer lever as a Bush Bash competitor would their gearstick. My recording app only picked up the audible part of this conversation.

“We all did, we all did mate.” Frisbee’s eyes did not swerve from mine. “Saw him. Heard him. Possum, pink nose, the lot. On shy days, you could see his whiskers twitching in his hole, and the light in his eyes.”

The publican winked. One point obviously not captured in the audio recording. Without video I have no way of going back to interpret this: a reassuring or a colluding gesture?

A spry old man interrupted, ordering a craft beer. The bottle gurgled and blew bubbles as the lid skittered across the oaken bar top. A new local tippie labelled Possum Brew.

“The mayor has it through Council and the plans are up for community consultation. You can have a squiz tomorrow,” Frisbee said.

“Plans?” My subjects often needed guiding into clarity.

“For the Big Possum,” explained the spry craft beer enthusiast. “That’ll get all the tourists into town, put us on the Grey Nomad trail.”

“Heya, Jem, why don’t you call a spade a spade,” heckled a proudly-self-declared-fifth-generation Australian. “You mean get the folks in their retirement spending up big here. On the *money* trail.”

Frisbee had obviously had a hand in the design of the proposed attraction. He said, “The Big Possum will be built of wire mesh, 25 ft tall,

somewhere between the Big Potato in Robertson and the Big Merino in Goulburn. Plastered with reinforced concrete. Money in the budget to get the eyes right. Some artist like Dvate. He does beaut possum eyes like no-one else. Check out the ones in Benalla on the side of the old store next time you're going through. Like, if marbles could weep." Frisbee winked again. Punctuation? A twitch?

The word eccentric appears in my notebook next to his name. I speculated that his parents must also have been firmly on the *Looney Tunes* spectrum.

"You are named after the aerodynamic toy?" I asked, a little nastily when my interviewee refused to speculate how a possum could have the power of speech.

Frisbee replied with an unverifiable claim. "It is a family name. The frisbee was named after us."

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The young woman of Asian heritage at the Bakery was equally unambiguous about her admiration for Bernard the outspoken possum.

"Some of the things he said. Brought us all up short. Philosophical-like. Like the thing about the unexamined life. We've all been watching our neighbours with new appreciation."

Never stop a subject in full flow. I bit my tongue and found Bernard's full quote about the unexamined life in the files later. Socrates had been radically reinterpreted with the addition of a subclause. "The unexamined life is not worth living, so have a gander over the fence at your

neighbour once in a while."

And is Bernard wrong? We all want to be seen.

"Do you want a pie while you're here? A cake?"

I perused the offerings, from the hot golden pastries to the cold, glassy icing tops of the desserts.

"The pies sold like hot cakes," she said without irony. "Got some bonza reviews on Tripadvisor and now our Bernard pies are up for Pie of the Year at the Royal Show."

I paid for my interview with a purchase. She shovelled the Bernard pie into a paper bag.

"Once we renamed them . . ." Jade Tran reminisced fondly. "There was a bit of a misunderstanding at first amongst the patrons with the Possum pie lined up with the Beef pie and the Chicken pie. As if we'd . . . We *love* Bernard."

I bit into my pie and gave her a thumbs up while cyclone-ing air into my mouth to soothe the burn.

"They make socks out of possum wool in NZ. The world is amazing," the baker smiled.

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Like everyone, the publican and the baker were grabbing at life after uncertain times. The town's population was 103 according to the last census. I could have interviewed every last one of them and got the same story, from the local journalist who'd broken the news to the barely articulate kinder kids. The passing of the era of Possum Magic was universally lamented. All agreed

Bernard's pull-power on tourists needed to be reharnessed.

The dog wandering down the town's second street had eyes as limpid and brimming as the creation of any street artist. A kelpie-corgi cross, it had the head and body of the first and the stunted legs of the second. Standing low to the gravelly verge it returned my stare. Its eyes alone of all those in town said "Bernard? I don't give a stuff."

If I'd looked deeper, he'd surely have given me some existential quote about death.

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Once the rain eased, the next day after the day after, I left the town behind and ventured back into the forest alone. There I discovered that Hansel and Gretel's lesson about the dangers in marking out paths was not confined to bakery products. I found the correct point to step off the road but failed to re-establish the Fantale trail. Birds foiled the fairytale siblings, but for my trail, I suspected creepy-crawlies. Prime suspect: ants.

I trudged into the forest following shadows.

Guide Alice was in high spirits when she appeared by my side at a clearing. I'd sat to get my breath and assess my direction.

"Dad won't let me sit on the gravestones."

I leapt to my feet. The granite slab had been much eaten by time, minty green moss turning the etched letter into untranslatable hieroglyphs. Nature intent on erasing all memory of us.

"They came for gold and never got home," the child observed. "We're walking over seventy-

three dead people," Alice told me in her unswerving matter-of-fact tone.

She was not a ghost. Neither were her sudden disappearance and reappearance a corollary of camouflage. She had on the same outerwear as last time, namely orange jeans with flared bottoms and a purple puffer jacket. The collar sticking out above the zip, unironed, was baby blue—quite a different shade from what she'd been wearing on our first meeting—proof there'd been a change of underclothing. So, she was not completely unloved.

She listed the identities of the dead as we surveyed the crumbling monuments erected to their memory.

"How do you know all this?" I asked at a brief pause in her monologue.

"Bernard told me."

Which begged the question, "So how do you think Bernard knows so well the residents of a nineteenth-century, gold-rush-era cemetery?"

"He got told. That way where mums tell their bubs stories, while they're teaching them how to climb trees and what insects to eat and stuff. You say, you hear, word to mouth."

"Hearsay?" I prompted.

"Perhaps. Listening history, I think they call it."

"Oral history," I corrected.

"No, that sounds rude," she reprimanded. "Do you have my money? I'll take you back to Bernard if you double it for today."

The ominous growl came again as we walked,

echoing from deeper in the forest. It came closer, and this time resolved into words. “Alice, come away Alice.”

“My dad,” Alice observed without ostensible concern.

“Alice are you being bothersome to the incomers? Alice?”

I found I was holding my breath. The growl passed by at a distance, losing its volume.

“Your father is not Australian?” I dared to ask once the Northern accent was far enough away that her father would not overhear us.

“Yes he is!”

I’d actually ruffled her equanimity. “Sorry, I mean, is he of English heritage?”

“You mean, did my nanna and pop bring him over from Blackpool when he was a kid?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

A verbatim exchange. Verifiably. I hadn’t had time to activate the recording app but at that point Alice took the dollar notes I proffered and scampered off with an Arnie Schwarzenegger threat, *I’ll be back*, leaving me alone to scribble all that had passed into my notebook. Three goldminers, four asphyxiated Chinese, the drowned wife, the scalded baby and the murdered Afghan hawker peering over my shoulder to make sure they were remembered correctly.

All by myself, I found a tree that looked much as the one in the news reports and in my memory. Dead, abrasively rough trunk, a dark hole just beyond reach. I took it to be Bernard’s. I touched

my hand to the bark, feeling for vibrations down through the wood. I put my ear against the tree. Ants fell into my hair. A Fantale wrapper, relieved of its sugary ant-bait caramel, distracted me as it took flight from the ground beneath my feet, to be skewered on the spiky branch of a xanthorrhoea bush nearby.

I sat, cross-legged this time, on a cushion of leaf litter and the damp seeped into my jeans and cooled my flesh.

“I can be your amanuensis,” I offered the wise possum. No reply came. “I’ll just wait until you are ready to talk.” I did not know how else to approach him. I was not trained in the aggressive journalism of primetime media.

A bird screeched in the distance. A rare regent honeyeater or a common gossiping magpie. Bernard remained as silent as I, though he could well have called me the pillock or plonker I was. They were his favoured slurs according to the newspaper files and television recordings.

On reflection, it seemed a little strange that Bernard used such unique English slang. The type of words Alice and her father would have learned from their forefathers, that they’d likely use around their home and in their caravan. No coincidence surely. We are constantly picking up idiom from those we live by.

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As I returned to the motel alone I was arrested by horror. Seen from the path, along the road, verge to verge, pages of my notebook lay strewn. Pure white against the grey-green landscape. My heart



clogged my throat. I scrambled my hand into my raincoat pocket as the loose pages started into the sky and swirled. Ah, the folly of trying to cage a story! Gone with the wind. Then my hand met the substance of the leather cover. My notebook in my pocket after all. And the flock of cockatoos landed, continued to graze.

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Alice did eventually come back as promised. In the interim, I worried less about finding my way to and from Bernard's tree as I was slowly learning to read the landscape.

Turns out scribbly gums are not identical: they tell individual stories across their trunks. The striptease of the stringybarks are also variable, like dancers in a nightclub, bark falling in gay abandon from some, ribbons slumped exhausted around the old roots of others. More mushrooms bloomed after the rains and I kicked stinkhorns deliberately just to see the polygon skeletons burst out of the egg-like fungi and ejaculate dark spores into the air. I thought "stinkhorn" was a little cruel for these wonders. I smelled deeply each time and the spores registered nothing foul. The empty soccer ball shapes of the *ileodictyon gracile*—a much lovelier name I found on fungimap.com—became reliable breadcrumbs to my destination.

Then on the very last day I had left, Alice came back and sat with me below Bernard's door. I remembered to turn on the recording app this time.

She asked, "Why do you want to see Bernard

so much?"

I couldn't tell her about Wally. That growing up on a property out west, we'd had a wombat under the farmhouse. He'd talked to me through the long nights. But no-one believed me and I lost my only friend when we moved to the city. I'd hoped Bernard would be my friend. It would have been a simple and honest answer to Alice's question. The next best answer did. I told her, "Because I am going to write a book about him."

"A children's book? Picture books are where all the talking animals are," Alice observed astutely, zippering her puffer jacket to the very top.

"No. A big book. About the world and all the things we know and all the things we do not know."

"And all the things other people won't believe?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"So you understand," she sighed.

"I think so. But my holidays are over and I have to go back to the city to my work."

I realised I was too dirty for a smooth transition back to the city streets. I was all covered in rural grime. I uselessly whacked at the stinkhorn spores impregnating the hem of my trousers. They rose. Flecks dancing in front of my eyes. I inhaled deeply. Sighed more deeply.

"Me too." Alice stood. "We'll go home now my father has to start teaching again. Home again home again jiggety-jig back to the Big Smoke."

Finally, at last, I heard another voice in the

forest. It came from above. It was deep, guttural, the tone mocking. It said, “You’re going to miss me.”

Alice laughed. She hugged me and was gone.

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When I listened back to the recording later, in order to transcribe the final meeting into my notebook, I discovered Bernard’s voice was too far away to make out individual words. I could hear only the wind whistling tunes through the gums.

I watched the sun set and the city skyline create geometrically orthogonal constellations outside the window. Went back to searching the net for hope in the discovery of new marvels in the known universe. And the whereabouts of talking animals.

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Image: “[Creating habitat for wildlife such as th](#)” (CC BY 2.0) by [Brisbane City Council](#)