

INTRODUCTION

MOTHER OF THE GUMNUTS

It's hard to tell, hard to say, I don't know if the bush babies found me or I found the little creatures.

May Gibbs interview, 1968

Although they colonised a land rich in native legend and lore, homesick new settlers carried with them to Australia, among other comforts of home, their own creatures of fantasy. All the denizens of British nursery tales—Irish leprechauns, Welsh Kelpies, Scots brownies, and English pixies, fairies and goblins—were standard fare for white Australian children for over a century. Surrounded by a landscape wildly different from the gentle flower- and toadstool-sprinkled meadows of their beautifully illustrated picture books, where elves painted leaves red in autumn and fairies gorgeous in flowing robes and dragonfly wings floated in pastel twilights, it would not have been at all surprising if Australian children had decided that their own environment just wasn't proper fairy country.

When Australian fairy books began to appear, native animals of the gentler sort were seen to mingle with the familiar rabbits, and the prettiest wildflowers clustered with the daisies in dim woods and on grassy hills. Elegant, well-dressed European fairies settled into their adopted home. But the grey-green bush, with its ragged scribbly-bark gums and small, dry flowers, its brown creeks and rough bush tracks, continued to hold its own secrets.

One woman changed all that.

At much the same time as Beatrix Potter and Kenneth Grahame were sharing their observations of the English countryside and giving character to the animals of field and hedgerow, a young artist on the other side of the world was looking at Australian animals and seeing their potential as story characters. But, more importantly, gradually evolving in her mind was a unique response to the Australian bushland that was to result in a rich national mythology.

The artist was May Gibbs, her creation the bush world of the gumnuts Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie, their cousins Bib and Bub and a host of other gumnut and other wildflower babies: a world

of scribbly writing, koalas, possums, bull ants and beetles, kind old lizards, evil snakes and the horribly wicked, uncouth and cruel Banksia Men. Her unique vision so captured the hearts and imaginations of generations of Australians that today the bush babies—those little plump bare-bottomed figures with their gumnut hats or ragged-blossom skirts and their wide blue eyes—have become national symbols; gumnut words like ‘deadibones’ have entered the language; and for decades adults have remembered with a smile as they walked in the bush, the fearful respect with which they once regarded banksia trees. For children and adults alike May Gibbs brought magic as near as the bush was to their doorstep.

She began her career as an illustrator of other people’s work, and at first produced the attractive but conventional vision of fairyland with Australian ‘props’ that was gradually taking the place of purely English scenes.

But slowly a complete Australian bush fairyland started to grow in her imagination and its inhabitants to creep into her illustrations almost unbidden. The forerunners of the gumnuts can be seen in illustrations done in 1913. In the following year a bookmark and several covers featuring wildflower babies as well as gumnuts appeared. There was a series of cards for the armed forces—now valuable collectors’ items, but then familiar sights at the front. In the muddy trenches of France and on the sun-dried plains of Palestine, war-weary soldiers opened their Red Cross parcels and welcomed hand-knitted socks, woollen balaclavas and a cheeky message from one of the May Gibbs gumnuts.

*We are the gumnut Corp
We’re going to the War
(We’ll make things hum by gum!)*

Then, the books began. *Gum-Nut Babies* and *Gum-Blossom Babies* were the first Australian titles May both wrote and illustrated, and the critical response to them was quite extraordinary:

Gum-Nut Babies and *Gum-Blossom Babies* are two of the quaintest of distinctly Australian booklets that have been put on the market. It is too late in the day to expatiate on the pretty conceit and cleverness of these little studies for their popularity has long since spread over the continent. Miss May Gibbs is an institution of which we are

unreservedly proud, and we want the other side of the world to know about her.

The Bookman, *Sunday Times*, London, 7 October 1917

Miss May Gibbs, the inventor of the 'gumnut baby' further develops her whimsical idea with clever draughtsmanship. These little creatures belong to the same category as the leprechauns of Irish fairy tales. The artist gives a quaint individuality to her little people and, if the world is not getting too materialistic, she may perhaps be laying the foundation of a new Australian folklore.

Evening News, Sydney, 1917

The *Evening News*' forecast proved correct. *Gum-Nut Babies* and *Gum-Blossom Babies* were indeed the foundation of a new folklore, and three more booklets, *Boronia Babies*, *Flannel Flowers and Other Bush Babies* and *Wattle Babies* followed, to build May Gibbs' achievement. But had she stopped there, with these pretty fancies, beautifully executed paintings accompanied by whimsical and imaginative little snippets of prose, her books would have endured only so far as fashion and patriotism decreed. As has happened with several of her contemporaries, her illustrations would have survived, and her stories been forgotten or reprinted only to satisfy a vogue for nostalgia or 'Australiana'.

But she did not stop there. Between the publication of the first two bush babies booklets and the last three, May Gibbs started writing and illustrating *Tales of Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie*, which, together with its sequels *Little Ragged Blossom* and *Little Obelia*, filled out and defined her bushland fantasy world and became the benchmark by which all other Australian children's books are measured. Combined in one volume, *The Complete Adventures of Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie* in 1940, the three Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie books have never been out of print and have remained Australia's most popular children's classics to this day. They have triumphed over wartime paper restrictions, depression, the competition posed by floods of brightly coloured picture books from overseas and increasing numbers of vigorous new native productions. They continue to flourish in the computer/television/spacetravel/nuclear age as they flourished in the days when a horse and buggy was still the most reliable form of transport.

May Gibbs' work has survived and flourished because she was a true original who knew her audience well. The power of her

images has never failed; her vision has never dated. Among the unstinting praise on the release of *Tales of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* was a piece from the *Sunday Times*, Sydney:

Snugglepot and Cuddlepie are the quaintest possible creatures and as ingenious in their opportunism as their originator. A book of which children will never tire.

May Gibbs' books have become part of Australia's consciousness because indeed children have never tired of them. They mirror life as children see it: a series of adventures, dangers, happinesses and griefs with no tidy endings or pat solutions. The gumnuts themselves survive perils and misfortunes, meet bad people as well as good. They see unfairness and unhappiness, are terrified by monsters and rescued by kindly strangers. Their world is detailed and busy, and for all its fascinating, amusing bush invention, very similar to the world children know—full of bustling people going about their own affairs while small dramas unfold about them.

No sentimentality intrudes to weaken the effect, or dim the power of the images and impressions. Every glimpse of bush recalls the magical illustrations, so children carry the visions given to them into adulthood, to pass them on to their own children in turn.

Perhaps May Gibbs wrote so well for her chosen audience because, in truth, the child in her never left her. Yet she was in her mid-thirties when the bush babies blossomed under her pen, and to tell her story we must go to the other side of the world, and to the year 1877...