



## MYSTERY, CHILDHOOD, AND MEANING IN URSULA DUBOSARSKY'S *THE GOLDEN DAY*

*The Golden Day* (2011) is an Australian mystery novel for young readers, set in the years between 1967 and 1975. In it, Miss Renshaw, a teacher from a private girls' school, vanishes from a cave on the Sydney foreshore, when she and her pupils go there with Morgan, a gardener who says he is a poet and a conscientious objector, to see some Aboriginal rock paintings he has told her about. The loss of their teacher has a profound effect on these girls, who are thrust from childhood innocence to adult awareness. Some believe Miss Renshaw will return. Others think she is dead. Both are correct. In the years following her disappearance, the girls grow up and make their way through the education system in their conservative private school. As they grow, they reflect on her disappearance, interweaving their thoughts about this dramatic event with the facts and ideas they learn in the classroom and in life.

On the surface, *The Golden Day* is a typical Australian novel for young readers, in which thoughtful girls come of age following a dramatic event. Australian children's literature is preoccupied with ideas of growing up, finding oneself, fitting in, and finding one's place in the world. I believe it is a powerful example of the genre, and that it is so because of its subtle and resonant use of intertextuality. This intertextuality situates a narrative of Australian girlhood within the contexts of classical mythology, Australian art and literature, as well as aspects of Australian history, and the Australian education system. Through a sophisticated integration of mythical, literary, and real elements, Ursula Dubosarsky has written a novel that offers a way of thinking about what it means to grow up, and also what it means to do so in a specific time, place, and context. Underpinning that thought is a delicate but powerful connection to classical mythology and classical education.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss the theme of classical education in Australia in a chapter written with Anna Foka, "Myths of Classical Education in Australia: Fostering Classics through Fabrication, Visualization, and Reception", in Lisa Maurice, ed., *Our Mythical Education: The Reception of Classical Myth Worldwide in Formal Education, 1900–2020*, "Our Mythical Childhood", Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2021, 295–310.

Ursula Dubosarsky's educational experiences form some of the background of *The Golden Day*. Born in Sydney in 1961 into an intellectual family (her father was a prominent journalist, her mother was a biographer), Dubosarsky was educated at the Sydney Church of England Girls' Grammar School (SCEGGS). She studied Latin, Greek, and Old Icelandic at Sydney University, and completed a Creative Practice Doctorate at Macquarie University. She has written a wide variety of children's books, including picture books, children's and young adults' novels, and non-fiction works on etymology for young readers, as well as a number of short children's plays based on the works of Ovid, published in the New South Wales *School Magazine*. The book which I have chosen to discuss is part of her body of novels for young adults, some of which reflect Dubosarsky's interest in ancient languages and literature – for example, *Black Sails, White Sails* (1997), a novel about childhood memories and mistaken friendships, draws its title from the story of Theseus, and *The Blue Cat* (2017), a novel about Sydney during World War Two, makes use of the *Aeneid* in its reflection about exile, immigration, and nation. Dubosarsky's work is marked by a subtle sense of humour and an interest in the reliability, or unreliability, of perception.

*The Golden Day* is elegantly told, filtered through the perceptions of the schoolgirls, but overseen by an omniscient narrator who contextualizes and comments on the scene. It operates from inside and outside of the schoolgirl experience, making it an unusual kind of children's novel that reflects openly on what it means to be a child. In doing so, it draws on a range of Australian influences, such as the school novels of Henry Handel Richardson (1870–1946) and Joan Lindsay (1896–1984), which comment on the way that schoolgirls are in possession of powers they may not understand, and are also vulnerable to forces outside their control. Girlhood is perilous in Australia: *The Golden Day* is set against a historical backdrop of loss, disappearance, and violent death, in which Australians of all kinds of status can go missing, be killed, or overthrown. Girlhood is also precious: a "golden" time of childhood, full of play, thought, and promise; demanding protection. *The Golden Day* captures these paradoxes through its employment of the school-story format and careful use of historical detail. Alongside, and running through the novel, classical material offers ways to think about the great mysteries of life, death, disappearance, knowledge, power, and coming of age.

## Death and Disappearance

The opening of *The Golden Day* focuses on death:

The year began with the hanging of one man, and ended with the drowning of another. But every year people die and their ghosts roam in the public gardens, hiding behind the grey, dark statues like wild cats, their tiny footsteps and secret breathing muffled by the sound of falling water in the fountains and the quiet ponds.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1:** Charles Blackman, *Into the Beautiful Garden* (1956), National Gallery of Victoria, Australia. Used with permission.

The story begins on 4 February 1967, the day of the execution of a man named Ronald Ryan, who had killed a prison guard during a botched escape attempt from Pentridge Prison, in the state of Victoria. Like many Australians who protested the execution, Miss Renshaw is incensed.<sup>3</sup> She takes her pupils into the nearby public gardens, to think about the execution: “‘Today, girls,’

<sup>2</sup> Ursula Dubosarsky, *The Golden Day*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011, 3. All subsequent quotations from the novel are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Ryan’s was the last state execution to be carried out; the death penalty was abolished by the federal government in 1973.

said Miss Renshaw, 'we shall go out into the beautiful garden and think about death'" (3). The garden is a reference to the Royal Botanic Garden Sydney, near to the girls' school in Darlinghurst, Sydney. *Into the Beautiful Garden* (1956) is the title of a painting by the Australian artist Charles Blackman (1928–2018), whose series of works about schoolgirls form part of the inspiration behind *The Golden Day* (see Fig. 1). In the afterword to the novel, Dubosarsky explains that she saw an exhibition of Blackman's work, and was fascinated by his paintings of schoolgirls, in the skirt, blazer, and large straw hat that is traditional uniform for girls at private schools. It is the first of a number of allusions to art in her work, and to ideas about girlhood in Australia, and this reference, along with the mention of Ronald Ryan, begins the novel's oscillation between fact, fiction, art, history, and the perception of life.

In the beautiful garden, reached by passage through a labyrinth of trees, Miss Renshaw meets Morgan, a gardener and a "widely-published" poet with whom she is in love, and with whom she has arranged an expedition to see a nearby cave with some Aboriginal rock paintings in it. Morgan has curly hair and a low and "owlish" voice (17), and knows "more about the secrets of the foreshore than anyone", Miss Renshaw tells the girls (18). She assures them, "today we are going to do something very special to help us remember this sad day": Morgan is going to take them to see "hidden caves with Aboriginal paintings from the Dreamtime, thousands of years old" (27). The girls, who may suspect something is not quite right about Morgan, tell him what they know about the Aboriginal Dreamtime, the system of mythic beliefs of Indigenous Australians:

"We know about the Dreamtime," said the tallest Elizabeth. "Last year in Term One we did fairy tales, in Term Two we did Greek myths, and in Term Three we did the Dreamtime." She counted them off with her fingers. "I hate myths," said Martine.

"Ah, but you don't really know about the Dreamtime," said Morgan, pulling a cigarette from his top pocket, "if you haven't seen these caves." (27–28)

The girls question Morgan – is he an Aborigine, does he know Aborigines, where did he encounter them in the outback? But Miss Renshaw brushes them aside, swearing the girls to secrecy about their "privileged" expedition to the "hidden caves" and the "ancient sacred paintings, from the Dreamtime" (28).

Miss Renshaw's stress on secrecy may prove her undoing, for when she disappears and the girls return to school they say nothing to their teachers or the authorities about what their teacher has been doing, and who with. It also

reveals her weakness as a guardian to girls whose innocence and ignorance Dubosarsky emphasizes. Their youth, their "littleness", their newness to a large, confusing world, makes them vulnerable and in need of guidance. Like many young Sydney dwellers from non-Indigenous backgrounds, they know very little about Aboriginal culture, and indeed are almost as ignorant about Australia's land and history more generally. Vivacious Miss Renshaw, who has springy, curly hair like a lion, quotes poetry, moves in artistic circles, and speaks with a kind of learned precision, is the guide they have been given. But Miss Renshaw's erudition and wide range of reference mask that she is also ignorant. Blinded by her romantic visions, she does not realize that Morgan, the poet-gardener, is not all he seems. In the gardens, he seems like a mythological figure, with his curly hair and owl's voice, his habit of not looking directly at the girls, and his possession of seemingly secret knowledge. An atmosphere of mystery and myth suffuses this scene, in which he leads the girls and Miss Renshaw down through the "labyrinth-like" gardens, to the secret cave on the foreshore.

Literary allusions and mythical intertexts immediately begin to cluster. Morgan's Pan-like qualities and his resemblance to the Pied Piper of Hamelin come together as he leads the teacher and her charges through the gardens and along the shore to the mysterious cave. References to famous Australian stories of missing children are clear. As Sophie Masson notes, *The Golden Day* participates in a tradition of Australian Pied Piper stories, which include *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) – Joan Lindsay's influential novel about schoolgirls and a teacher who go missing on a Valentine's Day picnic in the Victorian countryside.<sup>4</sup> *Picnic* emphasizes the Australian landscape's mystery and hostility (to non-Indigenous Australians) and draws on classical ideas of Pan-ic space to do so.<sup>5</sup> *The Golden Day* deliberately plays with references to this famous Australian novel; its action begins in 1967, the year the novel *Picnic* was published, and ends in 1975, the year the film version by Peter Weir was released. Peter Pierce notes that the image of the schoolgirl lost or overwhelmed by the Australian landscape is common in Australian literature and film, and commonly associated with a history of settler anxiety about the land:

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<sup>4</sup> Sophie Veronique Masson, "Fairy Tale Transformation: The Pied Piper Theme in Australian Fiction", *M/C Journal* 19.4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1116>.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Pan in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, see Saviour Catania, "The Hanging Rock Piper: Weir, Lindsay, and the Spectral Fluidity of Nothing", *Literature/Film Quarterly* 40.2 (2012), 84–95.

Lindsay and Weir surrender to a mystification of the Australian landscape, which invests it with a power to enchant and lure that is deliciously fatal. Both novel and film of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* want the human dimension of the lost child story to be reduced to a puzzle without an answer, to the scrabbling of people across a vast, animate, indecipherable landscape, or their disappearance into it.<sup>6</sup>

Lindsay is writing a novel about nineteenth-century Australians from a twentieth-century vantage point, and so *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (both book and film) offers a critique on outmoded attitudes in a settler culture that is still finding its way in relation to the wide brown land of Australia. *The Golden Day* is written in the twenty-first century, looking back to the 1960s and 1970s, and looking (as I shall discuss below) at an educational system that is on the cusp of dramatic change, not least in terms of attitudes towards the country and its Indigenous people. But broadly speaking, Dubosarsky is not a writer of the Australian landscape. Instead, her focus is on the Australian city and its people. In *The Golden Day*, that mythic landscape exists on the edge of the city, just out of sight, but potent; built over, but still there. It is another piece of the puzzle, present but lightly so, lurking beneath the overlay of manicured gardens, pavements, and private schools.

Of course, the girls' entrance into the cave with their teacher has overtones of katabasis, of feminine initiation mysteries, common to *Picnic* and to other stories of the entrance into womanhood.<sup>7</sup> When the girls are in the cave with Morgan and Miss Renshaw, they attempt to look at the rock paintings in the flickering light of Morgan's torch.

Morgan shone his torch on the roof and walls of the old, old cave. The little girls felt wrapped up in a strange silence. It was as though outside the birds had stopped singing and the waves had stopped rolling and the leaves of the trees had stopped shaking and falling in the wind. [...]

"Thousands of years old," said Miss Renshaw softly. "Thousands and thousands of years. Think of that, girls. These paintings have been here all those thousands of years. There were people here, inside this cave." Cubby stared at the wall of shaking torchlight. She had imagined big drawings

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Pierce, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 164.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., see the initiation into womanhood of Judy Woolcot in Ethel Turner's *Judy and Punch* (1928), the sequel to the famous *Seven Little Australians* (1894), in which Judy, a rebellious heroine who runs away from school, has a spiritual rebirth after spending a night in a cave.

of kangaroos or people with spears. But she couldn't see anything. Was that something faint and figure-like in the depths of the stone? The torch moved away again before she could be sure. (36–37)

Cubby, one of the pupils, is a thoughtful girl who becomes the focalizing protagonist of the novel, which is increasingly filtered through her perceptions. While she is in the cave, Cubby cannot see anything, though later her classmate Georgina tells her it was "hands, lots of them. Hands on the rock" (84). Instead, she has "such a feeling of loneliness", as "though everyone's gone" (37). And one by one the little girls succumb to what seems to be an existential panic, leading them to flee the cave, leaving their teacher and Morgan alone, and spilling out into the sunshine "like dice falling from a cup" (39), thrust, in a kind of feminine mystery, into an adolescent girlhood that is scarred by the loss of their teacher. As Masson observes, the girls are "lost" to their childhood from that moment and are never able to recover their state of innocence.<sup>8</sup>

Do the girls flee from the cave because of their fear of the mystery of the Australian landscape in the way that Pierce suggests? Do they flee out of a sense of incomprehension in the face of Indigenous mystery? Or do they flee because they witness Morgan murdering Miss Renshaw? Do they flee out of a generalized sense of Pan-ic anxiety? Or do they flee because in the cave they encounter the power of mystery itself? Dubosarsky does not say, and the mystery of the cave is left a mystery. Universal mythology intertwines with local contexts, to create a productive ambiguity. What is clear is that they are never the same again: that they take into the remnants of their childhood a sense of fear, of shame, and of loss that is transformative and that shatters what they know, or what they think they know about life.

## **Floating Schoolgirls**

*The Golden Day* reflects broadly on the challenges facing the thinking child, adrift in a sea of things to be known, taught only what comes her way, and in a way that seems arbitrary and meaningless. The girls, who think they "know all about mythology", having "done" fairy tales, Greek myths, and the Dream-time in their previous year of study, in fact know only a very little of anything their teachers choose to present them with (it is not clear that their teachers

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<sup>8</sup> Masson, "Fairy Tale Transformation".



know much more). *The Golden Day* is filled with scraps of knowledge, and references to orienting ideas, stories, historical events, people, geography, and more, presented as they come to Cubby.

As Cubby's teacher, the disappearance of Miss Renshaw is a loss of a mentor: a provider of knowledge, and therefore a stabilizing figure. When the girls return to their classroom, Cubby's sense of disoriented loss manifests itself in an out-of-body experience. On the blackboard, where Miss Renshaw had drawn a map of Captain Cook's journey across the South Pacific Ocean, Cubby sees the words "Not now. Not ever" appear in her teacher's handwriting (54). Feeling again the queasiness she had felt in the cave, Cubby begins to "float":

Very deliberately, she turned her eyes away from the board and floated upwards, swimming through the air, like a dream. She floated out the classroom window, her hat half-flying off her head, high above the laneways and streets. She floated all day while they waited for Miss Renshaw to return. (55)

Here, Cubby enacts an allusion to one of a series of paintings by Blackman, which are of schoolgirls in different situations: walking, playing, floating, against a stark urban backdrop, indicating a sense of puzzled urban alienation in 1950s Australia. Each chapter in *The Golden Day* takes its title from one of Blackman's paintings (*Hiding Schoolgirl*, *Fallen Schoolgirl*, *Schoolgirl Crying*); this chapter, 8, is titled "Floating Schoolgirl". In an "Author's Note" at the end of the novel, Dubosarsky indicates she drew inspiration from this core painting in what she describes as Blackman's "enchanted, disturbing, and endlessly evocative" series:

It's a painting of a surreal schoolgirl in hat and tunic floating above the city in the darkness – like an image from an urban *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. The flying child may be frightened, but she's also brimming with the joy of a secret life. (152)

Cubby's floating takes her through the day, and out into the world. And it connects her to mythical imagery, in particular the figure of Icarus, the boy who flew, but who flew too high. Cubby's closest friend in the class is called Icara, a further allusion to Icarus, and another image of flight. The girls are opposites, but are linked by their intelligence and thoughtfulness. Icara is a bright girl who will fly high in her studies. She is a "realist", according to Miss Renshaw, who dislikes her propensity to ask awkward questions. In contrast, Cubby, whose name evokes a bear cub, but also hiding places like cubby holes and cubby

houses, is a thoughtful dreamer: “[T]he world needs dreamers, not realists”, says Miss Renshaw. In fact, the world needs both, as *The Golden Day* goes on to point out, and the two positions are not as mutually exclusive as they might seem. “Realist” Icara is capable of fantasy: she tells Cubby that her mother is living in Los Angeles, when in fact she has died.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Icara thinks Miss Renshaw is dead, while Cubby believes she will return. Both are correct, though not in the way they expect.

Through Cubby’s sensitivity to art and literature Dubosarsky reflects on the power of both to evoke and encapsulate feeling. Thinking about the nature of life and death, she remembers Miss Renshaw quoting William Butler Yeats’s poem “Leda and the Swan” (vv. 9–11) over the death of Cubby’s guinea pig, Agamemnon, who had perished in his cage on a hot summer’s day:

“A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead!”

Of course, that poem was about another Agamemnon altogether, not a poor guinea pig lying on his back with his little legs stiffly in the air and his fur all spiky, almost as though he had fallen from the sky himself. Save your tears for greater sorrows, Miss Renshaw said, but then, reflected Cubby, Miss Renshaw hadn’t known Agamemnon. (103)

Within these nested allusions to painting, myth, and poem, we can see the images of flying and falling that pervade *The Golden Day*. Leda, attacked by Jupiter in the form of a swan, gives birth to Helen, the ostensible cause of the Trojan War, and the death of Agamemnon; Icarus flies too close to the sun and melts the wings of wax his father, Daedalus, had made for him. Encapsulated

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<sup>9</sup> I wrote to Ursula Dubosarsky asking about the inspiration for Icara’s and Cubby’s intriguing names, and quoting my father who had suggested that Cubby might connect with the name Columba. This was her response: “Well – Cubby. Hmm. I suppose when you are writing you seek a name that somehow warms you, but something individual. I think Cubby came partly from the character of Cuffy in Henry Handel Richardson’s *Ultima Thule* and also in the (devastating) short story *The End of a Childhood*. Then it sort of transformed into Cubby – I think partly because of my own name (Ursula) meaning ‘little girl bear cub.’ And I think your father is probably right about Columba – there’s something connected there – I suppose a dove and a bear – it’s not clear in my mind but I agree with him. A Saint Columba’s church is near where my father lives and I pass it often, so perhaps also that’s how it sank in”. As for Icara, “I can’t remember now – but did I tell you there was a girl at school called Icara? younger than me, so I didn’t really know her, but the name always stayed with me, for obvious reasons” (Ursula Dubosarsky, personal communication, 10 October 2017).

in these lines, and in Yeats's poem, are the intertwined perils and beauties of myth. (How Cubby comes to name her pet guinea pig "Agamemnon" is not explored; it underscores her status as being from an educated family, the whimsical, poetic, "dreamy" aspects of her character, as well as Dubosarsky's sly sense of humour.)

While Cubby floats among images and referents, real life brings her to earth: she reflects on Miss Renshaw's disappearance; she observes the emotional currents in Icara's family (her father, the judge, is somehow obscurely involved both with his housekeeper and with one of the older girls at school<sup>10</sup>). Eventually, the girls' pact of silence is broken, and the police are called. An amber pendant, which Miss Renshaw was wearing on the day of her disappearance, is found on the floor of the cave. It is discovered that Morgan had a criminal record, and it is assumed that he has somehow killed the teacher and hidden her body. The girls grow up, and their original small class is absorbed into other classes. But a "thin, strong bond of shame" joins the girls, who feel an odd sense of guilt for the death of their teacher. To put it another way, the cave, and the mystery of what happened there (and what they may have witnessed), comes with them.

## Knowledge (Facts and Myths)

Around their growing up, learning, life, and death go on. Towards the end of 1967 the Australian Prime Minister, Harold Holt, goes swimming off the South coast of Victoria and is never seen again. The Vietnam War is raging overseas, and many young Australians are sent to play a part and to die. In July 1975, Juanita Nielsen, a wealthy Sydney activist, is kidnapped in King's Cross and never found. In November of the same year, the government led by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam is dismissed, following a constitutional crisis. Meanwhile, the girls learn fact upon fact: "They learned about the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert and the invention of Hindu-Arabic numerals and the life cycle of the garden snail" (90). The teacher who imparts these facts does so in vain attempts to ease her pupils' sorrow as they wait for news about Miss Renshaw.

Dubosarsky makes no attempt to reconcile facts with myths: the implication is that Cubby must find her way among them, as part of her growing up. Classical learning (with its interweaving of facts and myths) can help (perhaps Cubby naming her guinea pig "Agamemnon" indicates this?). The school of *The*

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<sup>10</sup> Known as "Amanda-fit-to-be-loved", in a classic Latin-classroom joke.

*Golden Day* is based on SCEGGS, the Sydney Church of England Girls' Grammar School, where Dubosarsky was a pupil in the 1970s. Private schools in Sydney in the 1960s and 1970s generally taught classical studies in some form, including Latin and ancient history.<sup>11</sup> In their last year of school, Cubby and Icara and two others of Miss Renshaw's girls study ancient history. Their final exam is on Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Dubosarsky gives the passage here, along with the exam question:

At last, when many dead now lay piled one upon another in the stream, and part of the army had been destroyed at the river, and the few that escaped from thence cut off by the cavalry, Nicias surrendered himself to Gylippus. THUC. VII.85

To what extent can Nicias personally be held responsible for the Athenian defeat at Sicily? (125)<sup>12</sup>

This final exam question might liberate Cubby and Icara from their feelings of responsibility to Miss Renshaw. As it hints, the girls cannot be held accountable for their teacher's death. After all, they were in her care, not the other way around.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, completing this exam frees them from their obligation to the system of learning that has held them for the past years:

<sup>11</sup> Classics and ancient history are taught in the Australian school system, and offer a pathway to university study. With few exceptions, Latin is taught only at private schools in the major cities.

<sup>12</sup> Taken from the NSW (New South Wales) Department of Education Higher School Certificate (HSC) Examination in Ancient History, in 1975. Though this is a real example of a 1970s HSC examination paper, Cubby and her classmates have had a curiously old-fashioned education. Their school is highly reminiscent of old school stories, such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and the modernist paean to talented girls, *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910), by Henry Handel Richardson (and made into a film in 1977 by Bruce Beresford). Dubosarsky cites Richardson as an important influence (see n. 9).

<sup>13</sup> I am reminded of A.A. Milne's comic poem "Disobedience" (from *When We Were Very Young*, ill. E.H. Shepard, New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1924, 32–35), in which a recalcitrant mother disobeys her son and is lost forever (vv. 1–10):

James James  
Morrison Morrison  
Weatherby George Dupree  
Took great  
Care of his Mother,  
Though he was only three.  
James James Said to his Mother,  
"Mother," he said, said he;  
"You must never go down to the end of the town, if  
you don't go down with me."

Free! They looked at each other with tired grins. It was true. It was hard to believe, but they were free. They were beyond, somewhere outside and beyond. Beyond the battered paperback volume of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*; beyond the bodies piled up in the rivers of ancient Sicily; beyond Nicias and Gylippus; beyond teachers and black laced shoes and the ringing of bells, the racing of pens and flapping of turning pages. It was no longer necessary to think about what Thucydides had written those thousands of years ago on an ancient war. Even their own war, it seemed, was over now. The soldiers fled through broken streets into helicopters and up into the smoky sky across television screens all over the world. They were free.

"It's over," said Cubby out loud, but really to herself. "It's over." (128)

*The Golden Day* is both critique and homage in its depiction of school: scrutinizing the relevance or irrelevance of the things girls are taught at school and examining a specific type of conservative private education at an all-girls school. School at such an establishment seems almost an impossible space and time, a kind of chronotope akin to the impossible security of childhood – free from relevance to the realities of the adult world; able to spend time considering the life cycle of the garden snail, Thucydides, and other arcana of little relevance to the difficulties of everyday reality. Indeed, in contrast with the lesson of the cave, the girls seem to learn very little of meaning in their classrooms.

Another Australian writer, Nadia Wheatley, wrote a story, "Melting Point" (1994), in which Xenia, a Sydney teenager from a Greek background, spends a class translating the fall of Icarus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>14</sup> As she does so, she thinks about Crete, about its connection to her family history, in particular her Yaya, her grandmother, who does not speak English and has not assimilated into Australian society. Learning Latin, an exercise that seems pointless to her family, helps Xenia process elements of her life as a modern Australian, her connection to Crete, and to her grandmother. As Miriam Riverlea points out:

Wheatley's text actively interrogates what the myth might mean – if anything – to us today, [...] with implications for the way in which reception scholars, particularly those based in Australia, engage with the legacy of the ancient world and their own relationship to the past.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nadia Wheatley, "Melting Point", in her *The Night Tolkien Died*, Milsons Point: Random House, 1994, 207–238.

<sup>15</sup> Miriam Riverlea, "'Icarus Is Seventeen, Like Me': Reworking Myth in Young Adult Fiction", *Melbourne Historical Journal* 40.2 (2012), 26–44.

It seems that Wheatley's Xenia has found, through her classical studies, a link to a meaningful past and thus her present identity. It is not until the end of *The Golden Day* that it becomes clear that classical material has contemporary resonance, that it acts as more than simply a set of interesting things that may or may not have happened in the past, or that act as passing *aperçus* of decorative import only.

## The Getting of Wisdom

And yet, the lessons of school can have meaning after school is done. After they complete their ancient history exam, Cubby, Icara, and two of their friends go to a downtown café. There, Miss Renshaw appears to them, improbably wearing the same clothes she had worn on the day of her disappearance. She tells them that far from being murdered, she had found another exit from the cave, and had travelled around Australia with Morgan, who as a conscientious objector had wished to escape the draft. On their travels, he had become sick and had died.

"What about us?" Cubby burst out. "You left us there! Weren't you worried about us?"

"Oh, I knew you'd be all right," said Miss Renshaw, dismissively. "What could happen to you? You were perfectly safe." [...] "I knew you'd all go back to school," said Miss Renshaw, "and then they'd look for me and then they wouldn't find me and then life would go on." Tra la la, life goes on. "That's what happened, isn't it?" said Miss Renshaw. "Life went on?"

"I suppose it did," Cubby said dully. It went on, only it wasn't quite the same. It was never quite the same. (139)

Cubby and her friends are no longer the little girls Miss Renshaw could persuade to keep her secrets. They see through her; they question her airy assurances; they doubt her commitment to them. After all, was she not their guardian? She gets up to go, telling them she couldn't resist coming over when she saw them:

Then she leaned over, and patted Cubby on the shoulder.

"Don't look so stricken, Cubby. Courage. To strive, to seek, to find!"

"And not to yield," said Cubby automatically, for she knew the poem well.

"That's the spirit." And Miss Renshaw was gone. For the second time. Gone. (142)

In quoting these lines from Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses", written after he had learned of the death of his great friend, Miss Renshaw may be tacitly hinting that she has died. She may also be hinting that she has come back to offer a sense of closure to her grieving pupils. Or she may be connecting with the poem's meaning, in which the aged Ulysses thinks about what it means to have finished his Odyssey, reminding Cubby that life is full of adventure, and requires her to face it with courage and fortitude, even at moments when her strength might seem to have failed. It is yet another example of the enigmatic but suggestive use of intertexts that pervades *The Golden Day*; further testimony to the slippery and subtle powers of myth and literature to offer meaning and touchstones beyond the factual. Icara the realist may not pick up on them, but Cubby the dreamer does.

And yet, it is Cubby the dreamer who ultimately decides that she has seen through her teacher and that Miss Renshaw really is dead. She realizes this, once and for all, when the girls leave the café and stroll to the nearby Cenotaph on Martin Place (see Fig. 2) in the centre of downtown Sydney. The girls have been so busy studying for their Thucydides exam that they only now realize it is Remembrance Day, the day on which Australia honours its war dead. Once again (like Xenia in "Melting Point") Cubby wonders about the relevance of their education in making sense of the real world – when real war nibbles at the edge of their existence, what does it mean to be studying Thucydides?

A cenotaph, of course, is an empty tomb, a memorial to the fallen. Reminiscent of the empty cave, where Miss Renshaw was last seen. The girls discuss their seemingly returned teacher. Even sceptical Icara seems convinced she is alive, until they remember she was wearing the same dress. But as they leave the Cenotaph and run down to the harbour, Cubby's mind is racing, as she remembers:

She knew Miss Renshaw was dead, whatever Icara now said. Cubby knew it. Morgan had murdered her in that low, dark cave nine years ago. Cubby knew it now, without any doubt, because of something she alone had seen that afternoon, that no one else had even noticed. It was when Miss Renshaw had stood up in the café to say goodbye. She'd leaned over Cubby and touched her arm, and the collar of her geometrical dress had opened like a boulder rolling from the mouth of a tomb. There, nestled around Miss Renshaw's neck on a string of black leather, was the tear-shaped amber bead: the necklace that was safely wrapped up in a police evidence bag in a warehouse of unsolved crimes. Cubby saw it, unbroken, hanging around Miss Renshaw's neck [...] with the little insect still inside it, trapped forever in the bright golden honey of time. (147–148)



**Figure 2:** The Cenotaph, Martin Place, Sydney, Australia (2006), photograph by Greg O'Beirne, Wikimedia Commons.

This is the moment when Cubby comes of age; the moment when she realizes “she was not going to turn into the person she had thought she would become. There was something inside her head now that would make her a different person, although she scarcely understood what it was. *And we shall all be changed in the twinkling of an eye*” (148, emphasis in the original). As Masson puts it, “the eruption of the uncanny into ordinary life will never leave [Cubby] now”.<sup>16</sup> Cubby does not cease to be a “floating schoolgirl”; does not crash to earth as Icara does (focusing on her studies, and becoming “brilliant”), but instead comes of age by being able to accept the role of mystery in life.

<sup>16</sup> Masson, “Fairy Tale Transformation”.



## When the Golden Day Is Done...

*The Golden Day* is marketed as a mystery novel for young readers (the mystery of what happened to Miss Renshaw), and it can also readily be categorized as a coming-of-age novel for young adults, focusing as it does on Cubby's process of growing up. But it is much more. It is a novel that encourages readers to embrace the mystery of life: to find ways to come to terms with elements of the uncanny, even while understanding hard facts. Adding to this atmosphere of mystery is Dubosarsky's subtle use of intertextuality, in which the literary, artistic, mythic, and historical are interwoven into the novel's reflections about Sydney life in a specific period. This intertextual approach requires and rewards a wide range of literary knowledge, or the willingness to work to unpack meanings.<sup>17</sup> *The Golden Day* is not a novel that will sit easily with readers (young or old) who are not receptive to intertexts or to philosophical inquiry. Those who read only for the plot, for closure, or for answers, may be disappointed. But those who read for a reflective meditation about life, death, meaning, and more, will find in it much food for thought.

Readers may find themselves thinking about what it means to be young, and what it means to grow up. The novel's title contains a further allusion, to Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "Night and Day", which is part of his collection *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885):

When the golden day is done.  
Through the closing portal,  
Child and garden, flower and sun,  
Vanish all things mortal.

(vv. 1-4)

*The Golden Day* is a novel that explores the paradoxes of childhood: a period of supposed innocence and freedom from care that is also a period of puzzlement and mystification. Stevenson's poem is about children going to bed, leaving the "golden day" of play for the slumbers of night. Dubosarsky's novel also suggests leaving the "golden day" of childhood for the mysteries of adult life. It is a reflection on the movement through childhood into adulthood, and about the leaving of childhood. To quote the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians:

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<sup>17</sup> Perhaps explaining why the novel has appeared on a number of school curricula.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. (1 Corinthians 13:11, trans. New King James Version)

Miss Renshaw's disappearance is the beginning of the girls' need to "put away childish things". Taking her pupils down into the world from their tiny classroom at the top of a tower, through the "labyrinth-like" woods, into the "beautiful garden", where they meet Morgan, and then down to the sea, and into the cave, she has taken them out of a space of protected innocence and into a space where dangerous things happen. Significantly, for one who believes she is about to impart a mystery, she swears the girls to secrecy. On the surface, this is because they are on an unauthorized school excursion. Miss Renshaw is an unconventional and dynamic teacher, likely challenging the old-fashioned conventions of a conservative private school, challenging, too, the idea that children should only know assessable facts, instead of teaching them greater lessons of life. The girls leave the cave with their childhood innocence in tatters. Bound by secrecy and by a paradoxical sense of responsibility to Miss Renshaw: they are the girls who shamefully "lost" their teacher on an excursion; they do not tell anyone where they have been or what they saw there. We do not know what they saw in the cave. Cubby is not sure if she saw the "hands on the rock", or if she has had the memory implanted by her classmate's conversation. Whatever they saw, it has held them captive in a way reminiscent of the slaves of Plato's allegory of the cave: bound by loyalty to their teacher, gripped by uncertainty about what they have or have not witnessed. Perhaps they suffer from the "bewilderments of the eyes [which] arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light".<sup>18</sup>

In the 1967 portion of the novel, Dubosarsky emphasizes how "little" the girls are, how inexperienced, how dazzled by their teacher, and by their surroundings. And yet they have the capacity to learn, just as we all do. As the novel progresses, we see Cubby connecting with that capacity, and learning to perceive, to think, and understand; in the words of Socrates:

[T]he instrument of knowledge can only by the movement of the whole soul be turned from the world of becoming into that of being, and learn by degrees to endure the sight of being, and of the brightest and best of being, or in other words, of the good.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Woodstock: Devoted Publishing, 2016, Book 8, 195.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 193.

Does this not encapsulate what it means to come of age? To persevere, to “strive and not to yield”, in order to see things clearly, and to know as much of the truth as is possible? Another way of putting it is to think of Cubby developing her qualities throughout the years of her education. “Nature is a *quality* in the child which must be cultivated like a plant”, says the British scholar Jacqueline Rose, in her influential study of conceptions of childhood:<sup>20</sup>

In Rousseau, education preserves nature in the child, and it recovers nature for the child. In much the same way, literature for Garner gives back to children, and to us, something innocent and precious which we have destroyed.<sup>21</sup>

Rose is writing about the British novelist Alan Garner (b. 1934), whose fantasy novels for children frequently involve katabasis into earth, mines, and into encounters with fantasy and mystery that adults have destroyed. And she is writing about this paradoxical dance between innocence, mystery, and knowledge, which takes place in children’s literature. Dubosarsky has not, so far, written fantasy. *The Golden Day* is a realist work. Yet in it, she acknowledges the power of myth, of dreams, and fantasy. Throughout the novel are references to different kinds of fairy tales: the girls in their schoolroom at the top of a tower; Icara taking Cubby rowing on the river to “fairyland”, an abandoned amusement park.

*The Golden Day* concludes with Cubby and her friends looking out at the bustling Sydney Harbour, poised on the edge of womanhood, reflecting on what they have learned, ready to leave their childhood behind:

That afternoon, they felt no astonishment at any of it. Perhaps a butterfly, too, is unimpressed by its transformation from those worm-like beginnings. Why shouldn’t it crawl out from the darkness, spread its tiny wings and fly off into the windy mystery of the trees? The grub lies quietly in its soft cocoon, silent, thinking. It knows everything. A ferry was just leaving the wharf. It sounded its horn and moved through the harbour like a swan, towards an uncertain horizon. And although it was the end of the day, for all of them it felt like morning. (149)

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<sup>20</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, London: Macmillan, 1994, 44.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

Childhood must finish. It really finished for Cubby and her friends on the day of their teacher's disappearance. And yet the child has everything she needs to face life (she "knows everything"). Dubosarky puts it in highly poetic natural terms, of metamorphosis and of growth.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

*The Golden Day* evades easy categorization. A casual assessment places it as a coming-of-age novel for young adults, firmly in the Australian tradition of school narratives and mystery stories. But I believe it is more than that. It is a powerful work of literature that makes a moving case for the need to reflect on fundamental issues: in this case what it means to leave childhood behind, and to do so in a particular time and place. Its orientation among canonical texts from Classical Antiquity, European and Australian art and literature, and a host of other literary, artistic, and historical references demands and rewards an active recognition of value of intertextuality in encouraging reflection. Cubby and her classmates come of age in an atmosphere of learning and reflection that is at odds with the randomness of contemporary life: where young Australians can lose their lives fighting overseas wars; where those wars begin for reasons beyond school-girl comprehension; where young women, be they teachers or students, can meet unpleasant ends, accidentally or at the hands of people they know.

Life, like childhood, is fragile. But life also goes on, as the ghost of Miss Renshaw tells Cubby. It was Pandora's child-like curiosity, similar to Miss Renshaw's, that led her to open the box of troubles: pestilence, war, pain. But the last thing inside that box was Hope, with her gauzy wings. And this is where I find the mythical hope of this young adult novel for Australian readers. From her teacher's disappearance, and from her own continual reflection on the mysteries she witnesses and reads about, Cubby learns about the power of the uncanny sitting beneath the surface of ordinary life. Life is perilous, but it is also precious, as the myths and fairy tales that pervade the story tell us. The grub in its cocoon "knows everything"; inside the child is everything she needs to move through the waters like a "swan", having learned through her classroom lessons, and life outside the school, and through a range of art works, poems, and myths, how to face the difficulties of life.

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<sup>22</sup> The lovely reference to the swan is a final intertextual gem, referring once more to Yeats's "Leda and the Swan", and also to the final moments of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, in which a survivor believes the swans he sees are reincarnation of the missing girls.

