



SIBYL'S CAVE

by Catherine Padmore

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About Catherine Padmore

Born in England in 1972, Catherine moved to Australia when she was eleven, with her mother, father and brother. The family stayed briefly in Ettalong and Taree, then settled in Melbourne. After high school, Catherine completed the first year of an engineering degree before travelling through Europe. Following an epiphany in Prague, she returned to Australia with a new direction—arts. She began a BA (Hons) at La Trobe University, majoring in English, and went on to complete her PhD in creative writing at Deakin University. *Sibyl's Cave* was written as part of this PhD and was shortlisted for *The Australian/Vogel Award* in 2001.

On writing *Sibyl's Cave*

Sibyl's Cave was conceived almost a decade ago as a short story in Alex Miller's writing class at La Trobe University, about a young girl afraid of the water. The story continued to haunt me, and I let it grow, between university classes and part-time work, until it developed into a first-draft novel for another of Alex's classes and continued through a PhD in writing at Deakin, with Jenny Lee, Kevin Brophy, Christina Hill and Clare Bradford as supervisors. At Allen & Unwin the manuscript became a real book, although I have to keep pinching myself and inhaling that new book smell to believe it.

The urge to write came early. As a child, I'd penned the first chapters of a novel about a girl and her horse, beginning with the line: 'The day of the race dawned fine and clear'. Well, it was a start ... For many years, compulsively, I filled notebook after notebook with observations, fragments of conversations overheard on trains and trams, books I adored, significant events, song lyrics, poems, remembered dreams, words that lodged in my head, and strands of parallel fascinations that I felt compelled to investigate.

As the novel began to develop, I scribbled a note in my journal about one of these fascinations, the Sibyl's leaves: 'the leaves of the Sibyl—sewn together in tiny spider stitches—make the story'. At the time, I was also listening, over and over, to Yves Montand's song about autumn leaves, '*Les feuilles mortes*'. Both gave me a shiver of anticipation: what I have come to recognise as a writer's clue.

The Sibyls were female oracle figures in Greek and Roman times, offering cryptic predictions to those who sought to know the future, and I discovered that the leaves belonged to

a Sibyl from southern Italy who, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, wrote prophecies on leaves and sealed the leaves in her cave. To read the prophecy, a seeker had to open the door, disturbing the leaves with a gust of wind, then work to find the original pattern.

There are many tales of the Sibyls, but Virgil's stuck with me. The image of a woman laying out scraps of paper inscribed with cryptic phrases gelled immediately—my fingers recognised the sensation. I had followed the same process myself, transcribing sections from my journal on my typewriter (I had no computer), then cutting up the typed pages and kneeling on my floor to group the fragments in themes, in characters, in events. Piecemeal, different parts of the story emerged: one character's eyes, where another was born and how another died. While much has changed since those early drafts, including the main character, point of view and narrative style, many of these elements remain in the final version.

I realised that the Sibyl's leaves were the seed of the story. This gave me the confidence to accept the fragments and to trust the compulsion to know, through research and writing, about odd and unrelated things. Although uncertain exactly how, I recognised that the seemingly disconnected fragments of writing I had gathered would one day come together.

As I worked through subsequent drafts of the novel, the image of the Sibyl returned to me often, and I knew one of my characters would be a modern-day Sibyl, part oracle, part wandering and wounded hero, who would also be connected to the scattered leaves in some way. Unable to stop thinking about this mythical figure, I wondered what happens to her when the heroes leave and she returns to her cave. What does she think of when she wakes each morning? What are her everyday rituals? What appears in her dreams, in her nightmares? What does she reveal to herself and the world, and what does she hide? Who has she loved? Who has she lost? Who is her enemy? What does she do when she thinks no one is looking?

At this crucial point in the process, Alex Miller advised me to ground the story in place and tactile detail, so I let my curiosity about Billie's daily life direct the writing. Answering these questions in later drafts and through my PhD, I gradually discovered the woman beneath the myth, a woman I feel I know, as if she was part of my own family. In the process, she moved from being a peripheral character to become the story's protagonist. Writing her story, I shared her heartbreak, her dislocation, her joys. Every day at my desk, I wanted to know a little more about what happened to her. The fragments of memory she discovered were discoveries to me, too. For almost a third of my life, she has been with me. I'm proud and excited to send her story into the world, but at the same time there is an element of sadness, as if I am saying goodbye to an old friend, because I will no longer be able to follow her progress. Luckily, the 'writer's clues' are beginning to point the way to the next book, a new friend ...

Research has been an integral part of coming to know Billie in this way, of being able to imagine what her life might be like—different, in numerous ways, from my own. Part of the research process involved walking in Billie’s footsteps. Living three months on the island in the Hawkesbury, I watched the changing colours of river and sandstone, learning the rhythm of the ferry, and of the island itself. Returning to England, I worked hard to put aside my own memories of the country and tried to imagine it as if I were Billie, seeing it for the first time. In Italy I scribbled notes in my journal about the Sibyl’s cave at Cumae, Lake Avernus, Naples and the island of Ischia—writing fast to capture the initial impressions of all senses.

Complementing these visits were many years of book work. In libraries in Melbourne, Sydney, London, Great Yarmouth, Norwich and Naples, I read about Italy and England in the thirties, forties and fifties, Greek and Roman mythology, psychiatric treatments and institutions, drug addiction, art practices and leaf painting, the biology of leaves, the geology of sandstone and volcanic tuff, stonemasonry, and tales of migration. I also interviewed four other migrants, listening to their experiences of arriving in a new country.

For *Sibyl’s Cave*, the writing and research processes have been intimately connected and symbiotic: they feed each other. Researching the ‘parallel fascinations’ from my journal has influenced the writing, and the act of writing has directed me to new research topics. For example, when I first began to investigate the Sibyl’s leaves, I wasn’t sure where they belonged in the story. Billie, at that stage, was a sculptor, weaving metal webs between trees. How did the fragile leaves fit? While exploring her artistic methods in a later version of the novel, I wondered about the possibilities of painting on the leaves. Could it be done? Had it been done? These questions led me back to the library, to find examples of leaf painting. When I picked up a brush and applied paint to a leaf myself, the feel of the brush in my hand told me I had found Billie’s medium, and her painted leaves were written into the next draft.

Binding these fragments into a story has been a challenge and a joy, a process which has consumed me for the best part of a decade. I offer *Sibyl’s Cave* to you, hoping it gives you as much pleasure to read as it has given me to write.

Reviews

***The Sydney Morning Herald*—Cathy Peake The many paintings of a cave dweller**

Padmore's fascinating first novel functions like an archaeological study of Billie's life, which has been brutally fractured by politics and personal tragedy . . .

Her novel is structured in time frames that shift backwards and forwards through key episodes of Billie's life and through changes of name which neatly encircle the dramas . . .

The novel's title —perhaps a metaphor for the mysteries of her past, but also a reference to a real cave on the Hawkesbury island where Billie lives —anchors a narrative that surges forwards through passages of vividly realised landscape and often harrowing personal detail. She is confused, abused, chronically disorientated, but always a gifted draughtsman —even as a child, Billie falls into prostitution and heroin addiction in London, is rescued by a fellow student, and continues to paint. Throughout her life she clings to her identity as an artist, observing, recording, an astute but passive onlooker intent on making patterns in the sparse tangle of her family connections that bring her past alive and seem to point the way ahead.

What makes the novel so complex and exacting are its impulses towards bold and Arcadian mythologies which counter that passivity and accelerate the plot. If it is Billie's created resilience that keeps the story afloat, it is the author's sensuous transformations of her tenuous story that keeps one turning the pages and, finally, closing the book with a sense of deep satisfaction.

***The Sunday Telegraph* —Lucy Clark Compelling Tale of a Troubled Life**

Padmore has created a simple structure to carry a complicated story, and it works beautifully —alternating between the adult Billie's life and her childhood in Cibelle in Italy, and Queenie in London, and she leaves the reader hanging between two compelling narratives . . .

Padmore creates a marvellous sense of place through her attention to detail and landscape: from a volcanically rocky Italian village, where life is lived close to the senses, to a dour village bakery in Norfolk, to post-war London, and ultimately the bright glare of modern waterside Australia, where the circle is finally, satisfyingly completed.

The Age Review

Technically speaking, Catherine Padmore's first novel is well-crafted to a fault . . . *Sibyl's Cave* began as the fiction component for a PhD in writing and bears all the scars of its birth. Padmore's research is formidable, her style professional and clean—but if the effect of good realism is to make you believe in the story, to make you care about the characters as if they existed, *Sibyl's Cave* is a flop.

Australian Bookseller and Publisher —Mary-Ellen Jordan

. . . I loved the historical sections of this book—they evoked Italy and England and their cast of characters beautifully. They were thoroughly absorbing, moving and believable. But I struggled whenever we returned to the Hawkesbury. Here the narrative seemed forced and overladen with descriptions . . . despite the unevenness in quality, the past and present come together to create a convincing narrative, which I would recommend for its historical sections.

Herald Sun (Melbourne)

There is much to like about this Vogel Award-nominated first novel: evocative descriptions of food and village life on an Italian island, a vividly rendered portrait of a hot summer on a Hawkesbury River island, and Billie, a 60-year-old artist . . . Billie's sudden, melodramatic turn to prostitution and drug addiction are the book's weakest moments.

Limelight

Focused on the familiar and inextricable themes of family and identity, it is told by Billie Quinn . . . as the cliché goes, you can't run away from yourself. Quinn soon finds herself sinking into desperation. Saved by a friend she travels to Australia. Here, unfortunately, a large part of her life is skimmed over. Given her difficult start, the novel fails to explain how she reaches even the partial kind of peace she finds on Dangar Island . . .

Padmore describes place exceptionally well—Australian writers have always had a knack for writing about landscape. They're also, as Padmore illustrates, drawn to the idea of displacement. Perhaps it's because most Australians arrived only recently.

But Padmore's skill is not restricted to writing about landscape. Her characters are also complex and utterly believable. Quinn herself is a fully drawn character, and Padmore has achieved

an impressive feat in making her experiences —stretching from Italy in 1936 to Australia in 1990—seem wholly authentic. This novel might have been pared down a little —there are a few too many unfinished stories. But the main narrative is told beautifully, and *Sibyl's Cave* is a well crafted, ultimately successful story of a woman coming to terms with her own life.

Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ *Sibyl's Cave* is both the novel's title and an archaeological site visited by young Cibelle. What does the phrase mean to you?
- ◆ The elements of rock and water are strong features of this narrative. How do they function as metaphors?
- ◆ Billie lives on islands, yet she cannot swim. What does this say about her?
- ◆ It is apparent that Afrodite does not love Cristofano, so why does she marry him?
- ◆ As a mother, Afrodite is remote and unable to connect with Cibelle, while Cristofano is devoted to the child, even though he knows she is not his. Why do you think this is?
- ◆ 'She knew the clump of orange in her black curls bound her to this man in some mysterious way, but the knowledge made her belly churn ...' Billie's family includes more than genetic connections, yet the genetic link is highlighted by her orange forelock. What does this imply?
- ◆ Elissa cannot spend time with Audrey, yet she befriends young Sybille. Why do you think this is?
- ◆ To you, which is the most important relationship in Billie's life, and why?
- ◆ When Elissa returns to the pier to retrieve her shoes, Sybille lets her go, even though she doesn't want to. Why doesn't she run after her?
- ◆ In London, Queenie spirals down into prostitution and morphine addiction. Describe your reaction to these sections of the novel.
- ◆ While the narrative follows Billie's point of view, it hints at Audrey's pain and the ways she is also damaged by Elissa's death and subsequent events. Rather than bringing Audrey and Billie closer, this common pain pushes them apart. Why does this happen?

- ◆ As readers, we see Isaac as Billie does, until her realisation (as Bella) of the clash between her ideas of Isaac and other people's descriptions. Why did she not see these more appealing aspects of him? What might this mean for the portrayals of the other Quinns?
- ◆ After Billie returns to the village of her birth, she realises she cannot stay there permanently. Why is this? How does this compare to your own experiences?
- ◆ Much changes in Billie's life, but her artistic ability is a constant. How does this ability help her? How does it hinder her?
- ◆ In this book, stories of Billie's past and her present on the island are told in parallel. How might the experience of reading the book be different if these events were told chronologically?
- ◆ Billie's name changes often—she is also Cibelle, Sybille, Queenie and Bella. What does this say about her circumstances? Does her plan for a 'new name for a new city' work?
- ◆ Billie's journeys are an attempt to regain what she has lost, her home and her family. In your view, how successful is she?
- ◆ The myths and stories of ancient Greece and Rome surface often in this narrative. How do they relate to Billie's experiences? Which myths are important in your own life?
- ◆ Billie's personal traumas coincide with times of great political upheaval. How do these two levels of trauma function together?
- ◆ While Billie's story is the novel's focus, many in her household are changed by the events of the summer on the island. Which of the other characters' stories did you find most compelling, and why?

Further reading

Tree of Man, The Vivisector by Patrick White

The Prosperous Thief by Andrea Goldsmith

The Alphabet of Light and Dark by Danielle Wood

Eucalyptus by Murray Bail

The Ancestor Game, Conditions of Faith, Journey to the Stone Country by Alex Miller

Dirt Music by Tim Winton

Oscar and Lucinda by Peter Carey

The Aeneid by Virgil