

# Telling Tales



Julie Hunt has created a thrilling tale of life on the run in *Song for a Scarlet Runner*. The author spoke to **Jarrah Moore**.

**Stories are very important in the book, and Peat is a natural storyteller. Do you think she could have made it through her adventure if she hadn't been? Or was it that quality that put her in danger?**

Both, I think. It is Peat's storytelling that saves her when she tells the Siltman a tale that comes true, but from the start she is susceptible to stories. When she and her sister meet the stranger who tells them he is going to Hub, which is the centre of the world, both girls disbelieve him but Peat is captivated by the story. Later it seems inevitable that she would follow the stranger even if circumstances hadn't forced her to go that way. She is open to possibilities and although she gets caught up in other people's stories she finds her own strength through storytelling—and, more importantly, she lives to tell the tale!

**The book is a journey with quite distinct stages; the marshes, for example, are very different to the Overhang or to the Siltman's land. Which was your favourite to write?**

I loved writing the marshes. It was fertile ground with its floating islands, shifting tides and its community of outrageous marsh aunties. It was a place where words and ideas could proliferate. I found that once the marsh aunties started talking they wouldn't shut up. It was like being a child under the table listening to an absurd adult conversation. A lot of what they say in the story goes over Peat's head but she is listening hard because her survival depends on it.

**One of my favourite things about the book is how vivid and varied the world-building is. Are there places you imagined but couldn't fit into Peat's journey?**

Yes. At one stage I had a city called Mirth, a desolate place of shards, rubble and ramshackle buildings where people waited, sometimes for years, to save up enough money to pay their way through the toll gates which led to their future life. There was a great waterwheel in Mirth that

rarely turned, but when it did people stampeded to the mill to try and get work. Peat met a marsh auntie there who didn't end up in the story, a brittle little woman called Birch, who spent her time collecting herbs to sell at the market—plants called Meantime, Bidewell and Patience.

**Is the Siltman, the book's primary antagonist, based on any particular stories or figures of folklore?**

No, I don't think so. Baba Yaga and Ceridwen from Taliesin show up in some of the tales the marsh auntie tells but the Siltman is all his own. He is a character who exists in another dimension but has dealings with the real world. When I was writing him I asked myself what his story could be—where did he come from and how did he end up being the Siltman? I decided that he's not really human and never was. He's more of an abstract concept than a physical being. He is like time or justice. If you make a bargain with him it must be kept.

**Where did you get the idea for the sleek or scarlet runner?**

From the quolls that come to my door at night. I hear them but I don't often see them. They are fierce and clever and very beautiful with their spots and their bright eyes. I wanted Peat to have a familiar, an animal friend that is also part of herself. The sleek is treacherous but loyal

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too. I used him to get some complexity into the situation. I didn't want any characters in the story to be wholly good or bad and the sleek is both—he's mean and unpredictable, but more than once he saves Peat's life. **JUNIOR**

*Song for a Scarlet Runner is published by Allen & Unwin in April.*

**What was the last book you read and loved?**

*Tantony* by Ananda Braxton-Smith (Black Dog Books): it's a dark and wonderful tale that moves between worlds, or perhaps it's better to say it threads the worlds together—the imaginative inner world of the main character, Fermion Quirk, and the harsh environment in which she lives. The language is fabulously inventive in the service of the story and each paragraph delighted and surprised me. I can't wait for the third book in the 'Secrets of Carrick' series.

