

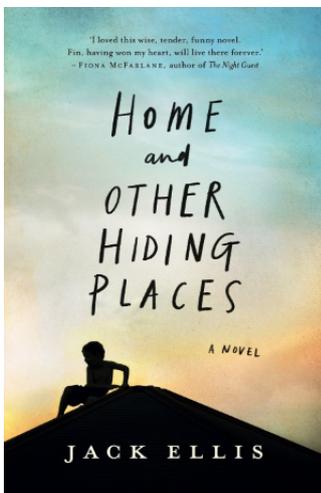
FICTION

Mutable worlds

Ambition and audacity

by Debra Adelaide (</abr-online/current-issue/author/4963-debraadelaide>)

March 2022, no. 440 (</abr-online/current-issue>)



*Home and Other Hiding
Places* by Jack Ellis

Ultimo Press, \$32.99 pb,
311 pp

I have said this already in a recent review, but it is a special kind of novelist who can write about young characters yet still engage the adult reader. It's also a special book that can handle the burden of what cover quotes are fond of labelling 'warm-hearted' or 'big-hearted' fiction. To me, such descriptions usually mean the kiss of death for credibility, but warm-heartedness is exactly what Jack Ellis's *Home and Other Hiding Places* delivers, without lapsing into sentimentality.

Ellis offers a compelling story about a family that is divided, directionless, and under pressure. The focus is on eight-year-old Fin, recently brought to live in Sydney with his grandmother by his mother, Lindy, who is trying to flee her demons, find a job, and generally prove that she is not the loser everyone seems to think she is.

This is a world where people struggle to be decent but are weak, compromised, or slapped down at every turn. Lindy is deluded and unstable, set up to be a victim, while Fin's father is unreliable and mostly absent, yet they are both trying as hard as their circumstances allow. No character is judged or stereotyped, and even Fin's cold and disapproving grandmother surprises everyone, including the reader, at the end. There are other strong characters: Fin's great-grandmother, the chain-smoking Josie, and the neighbouring kid, Rory, who almost steals the show with his military turn of phrase thanks to the influence of his grandfather, and his old-school survival skills, which he passes on to Fin.

Despite the serious dysfunctionality of its characters, the story is far from bleak. Fin is sweet-natured, innocent, and totally likeable. He sets off on mad adventures such as attempting to sail to New Zealand with Rory in a tiny boat, thinks his grandmother is trying to poison him, runs away at the threat of trouble, but maintains a core of kindness and generosity that belies his youth.

In one scene near the end of the novel where Fin's father is negotiating with him, we share a threshold moment of clarity about Fin's fugitive parent and his own life, his sense that he's about to leave the world of childhood adventures and road trips and enter a new, as yet uncharted, one. He is at once devastated by and understanding of his father's choices. The details of this scene are so poignant that I felt like my heart had been taken out and squeezed then replaced in a slightly different spot.



Debra Adelaide (</abr-online/current-issue/author/4963-debraadelaide>)

Debra Adelaide is the author or editor of more than a dozen books including *The Household Guide to Dying* (Picador, 2008), *Letter to George Clooney* (Picador, 2013) and *Zebra* (2019). She is also an associate professor in creative writing at the University of Technology Sydney. Her latest book is *The Innocent Reader: Reflections on reading and writing* (Picador, 2019)

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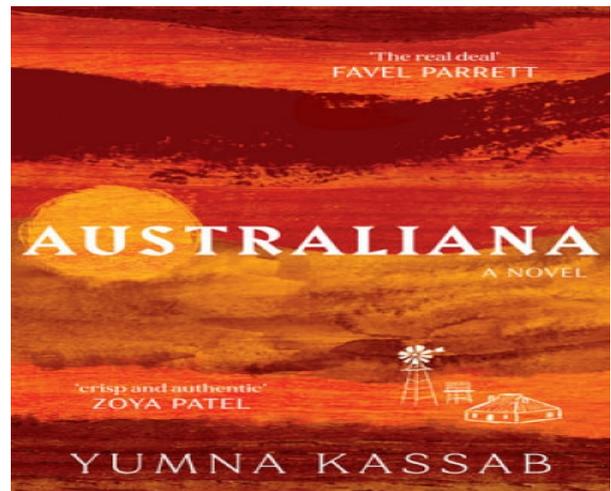
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