

Kaye Kessing's *RABBITS*



Back in the 50s and early 60s rabbits were prolific on our farm and took up a reasonable part of Dad's time. Like many country kids, by about six or seven, my brothers and I could usually hit a rabbit with the old .22, set one of the old style steel traps, kill by a quick head blow against a rock and as we strengthened with a quick sharp neck stretch. We lived in a world of killing, skinning and gutting and thought little of it. Mum, a city girl, who might now be termed a 'greeny' soon learnt it was pointless to push such views onto a young farmer struggling to improve a degraded property. I do not remember cruelty - in our family or others - we accepted that animals had to be killed and it was done as quickly and humanely as possible. Sixty- plus years on, with the old steel traps gone, lamb's tails no longer cut off and the continuing war on mulesing, farm animals must still be killed for others to eat and rabbits controlled.

As an environmental educator, I have focused on the killing of native creatures: directly by cats and foxes and indirectly by rabbits; choosing a comical 'cartoon realism' style to spread the 'death message' - hopefully in an appealing and respectful way.

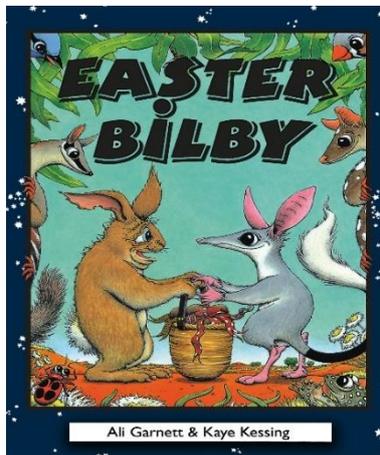
In 1972 I took a job as the first art/craft teacher in the Pitjantjatjara Lands - at Amata School in the far north west of South Australia and back in the world of rabbits. On most weekends the back of my old Valiant ute would be crammed with women, children, the odd dog plus blankets, billies, small crowbars and shovels. My job was to provide jerry cans of water and transport. I'd be directed towards fruits or seeds in season or to witchetty grubs, goannas or rabbits. Warrens could be huge: a maze of shallow tunnels twisting and turning beneath the soft orange-red sand. I'd watch the experts follow the fleeing rabbits along tunnels with thin sticks, wires or a sense of smell, digging into the tunnels when needed. Most rabbits ended up in dead ends, to be killed quickly then taken back for family. Some would be thrown onto coals to singe the fur off then lightly roasted beneath them. Having come from a family that loved its fatty mutton browned to a crisp, I never partook in much of the bloody, juice-filled, bush-cooked rabbit.

Rabbits were by then well established through the "Pit Lands" and long appreciated as a reliable food source by the locals. I was vaguely aware that there should be other small to medium sized animals about and, with friends, did spot bilbies near Ernabella once - apparently the last known group to disappear in that country. For a year-plus I lived, hunted and gathered with women who had grown up on bush tucker and had witnessed the spread and repercussions of cats, rabbits and foxes across the lands.

After a year of overseas travel I returned to complete my teaching bond to South Australia and met Bob Kessing, a commercial designer. We set up a sign writing and screen printing business in Alice Springs. It was not long before I was designing and printing t-shirts depicting witchetty grubs, bilbies, sturt desert peas and desert roses; promoting the native species I was learning about and few others knew of.

In 1989 I spent the year researching, drawing then painting the history and impact of the spread of introduced animals across the arid lands. "**Battle For The Spinifex**" became an exhibition of eleven large (1.5 metre) square canvases as backdrops.

In 1992 I painted the five-metre canvas backdrop for **“Spinifex Skeletons And Sewers”**, depicting Australia from the red deserts, through pastoral and agricultural lands to the big city. In front of it a friend and I performed the story of an unlikely friendship between a bilby and cat, with the inevitable consequences. Assisted by a rabbit, a hopping mouse and a night parrot puppet we toured it from Alice Springs to the Adelaide Festival.

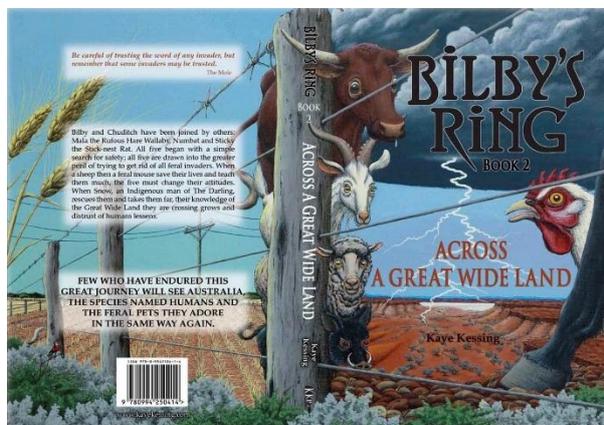


In 1994 I was approached by the then Anti-Rabbit Foundation to find a native animal to replace the introduced Easter Bunny. A grey, burrowing Bilby was the obvious choice and **The EASTER BILBY Picture Book** was born, telling how a humble bush bilby got the job of delivering Easter eggs around Australia from tired old Easter Bunny. Haigh’s Chocolates came on board, producing chocolate bilbies and for many years my alter ego ‘Gran’ read the story to families in Adelaide at Easter.

The EASTER BILBY'S SECRET Picture Book in 1998 told how Easter Bilby worked out how to get the Easter eggs around Australia without getting eaten by Cat or Fox.

In 2009 I began the research for a project I’d been imagining for years: to present the environmental situation across Australia - from desert, to pastoral, to agricultural with river ways and conservation areas, into **“The Biggest City by the Endless Sea”**. Following my illustrative style I presented the saga as fantasy: writing Bilby and four other endangered friends across Australia through its major ecosystems and habitat types.

In the ‘Great Deserts of the West’, Bilby and his mother follow the rains and in turn are followed by rabbits, who take over their burrows, eat up their food and so force them on. When Bilby’s mother is eaten by a fox, Chuditch the Western Quoll, a most unlikely companion, talks him into travelling together, **“to find a place safe from feral invaders”**. Joined by Mala, Numbat and Sticky the Stick-nest Rat - all directly or indirectly affected by the spread of rabbits - they journey through many new habitat types, meet other native creatures in trouble and learn about new threats far across Australia, including the potential of climate change.



In 2015 **The BILBY’S RING Trilogy** was launched by Ted Egan AO in Alice Springs, with a mini festival and great thanks to The Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) plus local scientists.

Rabbits have followed me from the family farm to Aboriginal lands and then through a working lifetime of projects: many perhaps rather bizarre but all, hopefully each in their own way, continuing to help spread the word about our increasingly fragile Australian environments.

Kaye Kessing – Feb 2021
 (Compiled with Bruce Munday)