

Q&A: Sue Saliba

We caught up with the author of *Something in the World Called Love* (which won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction) and *Alaska* (which was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction). Her latest novel, *For the Forest of a Bird*, was released earlier this year. Living on Phillip Island in Victoria, she spends her winters watching out for visiting whales and her summers protecting endangered beach-nesting birds.

What do you love about writing young adult fiction?

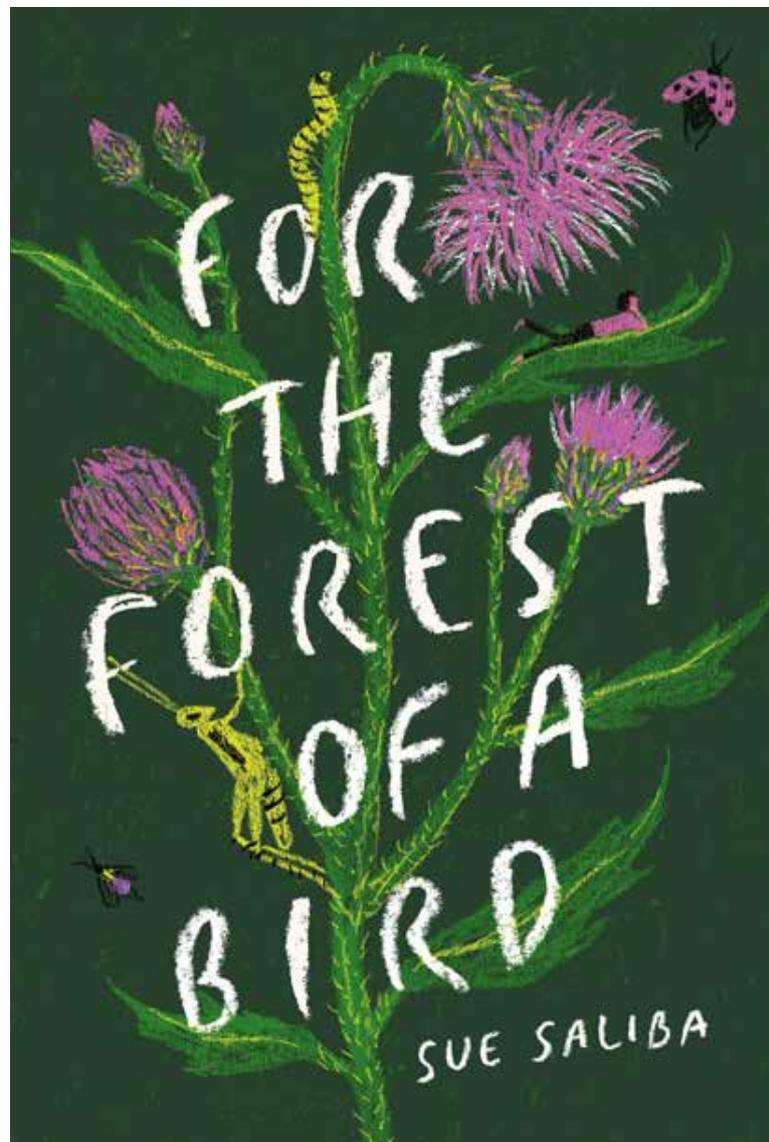
I think our teenage years are ones of real intensity. They are a time of transition, of exploration and of hope. I think they are a period when the world presents itself as full of possibility. I love writing for an audience in this phase and I love working with characters that are experiencing this period of their life. It makes me feel deeply alive.

There's something uniquely beautiful and poetic about your writing. *Alaska* and *Something in the World Called Love* are unconventional in their structure, free from the restraints of capital letters and rules, is this the way these stories first appeared on the page?

Yes, the stories appear as they were originally written. I think that the form (or how something is said) is as important in terms of giving meaning as the content (or what is said). Both novels are about exploration, about becoming and at times about the experience behind or between words, the experience in the gap before things are named and cemented, solidified. I felt a certain sense of fluidity as I wrote those novels and I simply wrote how I felt.

We read somewhere that the title of your latest release (2015), *For the Forest of a Bird*, is taken from one of Judith Wright's poems called 'The Birds'. Are you a poetry reader/writer? Do you think this has had an influence on your writing?

Apart from some poems I wrote as a student, I haven't written poetry, but I do love to read it. I particularly love Mary Oliver's poems about the natural world which have such an emphasis on close attention and the beauty of the untamed. I'm also a fan of Rumi's mystical and spiritual poems that appear for me as moments of insight and connection. Another poet I often feel moved by is Tess Gallagher with her gentle compassion.



For the Forest of a Bird, Sue Saliba (Penguin, Jan 2015)

I love the arresting quality of poetry, its sense of surprise and the intimacy it offers.

I think my writing probably has been influenced by poetry on an unconscious level. As I write I often find, for one thing, that there are feelings or emotions that realise their expression through gaps or spaces or moments of verbal silence.

Your books are also full of environmental enchantment and connections to the natural world, is this something you have always been passionate about? Is place something that is very important/close to you?

I always loved animals but it was about eight years ago, when I moved to Phillip Island from Melbourne, that I found myself becoming really passionate about animals and the environment. Suddenly I was surrounded by, what seemed to me, truly fascinating wildlife and sea creatures, as well, of course, as gentle and sadly exploited farm animals. I found myself becoming a volunteer, watching over the endangered hooded plovers over summer. These tiny birds nest and live their entire lives on the beach so, with humans using their home for recreation, they face a difficult future. It's likely we will lose them forever. The probability of their extinction has had a profound impact on me over the last few years. I've begun to look more closely at different animals around me and to appreciate their preciousness. I've also begun to see the connections between various animals and between plants and animals. I started removing some rubbish and weeds from a piece of public land near my house five years ago and slowly some of the indigenous vegetation is returning and, with it, a number of native birds and other animals. A butcher bird built her nest there last season and a beautiful blue tongue lizard followed me around last summer as I pulled up weeds in there.

Place is definitely something very important to me. It contains history and stories and all kinds of connections and resonances—it's very rich.

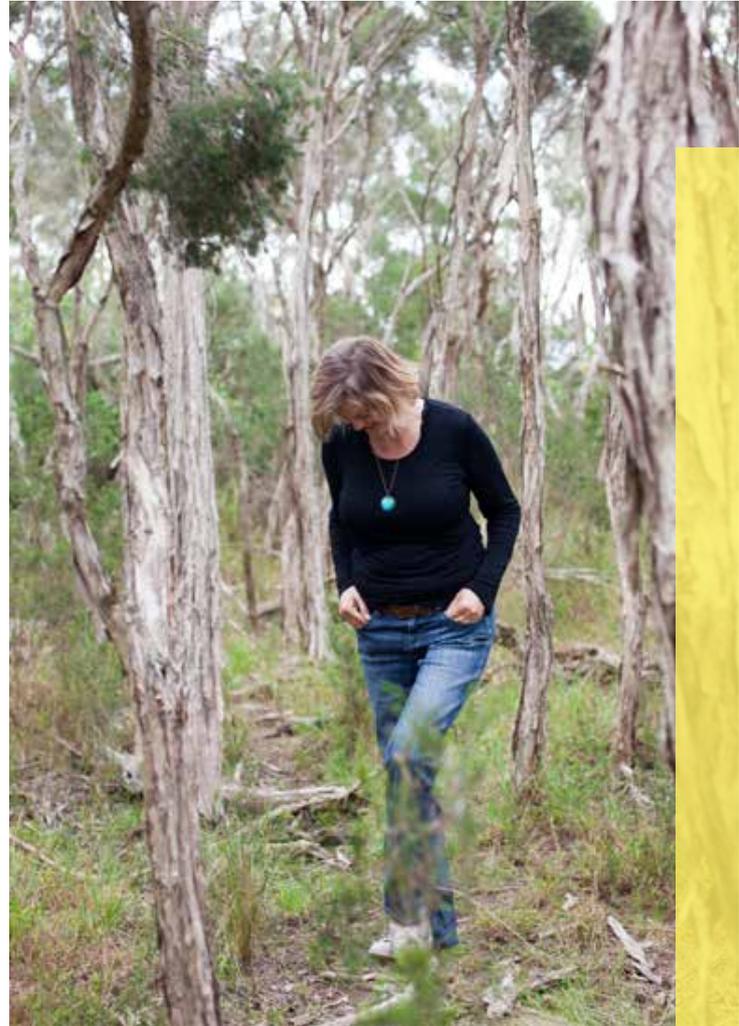
Which young adult books have made the biggest impression on you as a reader?

Tim Winton's *That Eye, The Sky* moved me greatly with 12-year-old Ort's sensitivity and vulnerability as well as the book's focus on wonder and the mysterious.

I loved the fable-like quality of Sonya Hartnett's *The Ghost Child*, along with the fact that the story is populated by animals of all sorts. I found the prose—like so much of Sonya Hartnett's writing—to be beautiful and constantly surprising.

How to make a bird by Martine Murray is a gorgeous voice-driven novel. It's poetic, dreamy and wise. I was excited by the way the story was largely told rather than shown, deliberately breaking with realist tradition.

Allyse Near's *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* melds fairytales with the contemporary teen world. The imagination, energy and richness of this book really impressed me.



What is in store for you next?

I have begun a new young adult novel. I'm very interested in the places writing can take us within ourselves; how it can be both a refuge and a space of real confrontation, challenge and growth and so my seventeen-year-old main character is an aspiring writer. I am also passionate about animal rights and this is something I want to explore more within this novel. I really do feel that animal rights is the greatest social justice issue facing us. The completely unnecessary suffering of billions of animals surrounds all of us in our daily lives but somehow we don't recognize it—perhaps because we don't have a way of seeing that allows us to know it for what it is. The appalling cruelty of the dairy industry, for example, goes largely unconsidered by most people.

Our mistaken perception that we are separate from all other animals—and the speciesism that arises from this—is something I would like to challenge and something I'd definitely like young adult readers to think deeply about.

Recently, I went out on a weekend with the very courageous team who rescue ducks in the midst of the shooting season here. At play—between the hunters and the rescuers—were two very different ways of behaving and two very different ways of perceiving other beings and our relationship to them in the world. It left a huge impact on me and it may be a key part of my new novel. ■