

## **Faced with lies that ring true**

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FOR each Christmas during his childhood, Benedict Waters, journalist and occasional narrator of *The Fern Tattoo*, gave his mother a blank journal.

In private, she filled her son's gifts with stories. "She told me more than once that she'd been writing her diaries since she was a young girl, though she burnt the early ones; she never said why," David Brooks writes early in his often haunting novel that follows three families and a century's worth of secrets and betrayals.

The novel begins shortly after the death of Benedict's mother, a time when the journalist is trying to make his name in "insider political stuff". Following the funeral, Benedict receives a phone call from a Mrs Darling, who claims to have known his mother. She invites Benedict to her house in the NSW countryside where he listens to the octogenarian's elliptical tales that involve several generations of three families. Benedict becomes so enthralled by Mrs Darling that for the next several years he continues to visit her, often rearranging his family's holiday plans in order to hear more.

Then one day Benedict receives a phone call: Mrs Darling is dying. With this news comes something more pertinent. The stories, Benedict finally learns, involve his own family.

One of the achievements of *The Fern Tattoo*, Brooks's second novel and fifth work of fiction, resides in its refusal to distinguish between truth and lies.

"There are lies and lies," Brooks writes. "There are some lies that are not really lies, at least not in a culpable, moral sense, but more a sort of necessary fiction, to mask or deflect the truth, for any number of reasons." Instead, Brooks makes allowance for something else, a story-truth that, in its own way, becomes more real than the events Benedict uncovers.

The novel's structure also comes as a welcome surprise. Brooks begins in 1887 with a young girl abandoned at a lighthouse on the NSW coast, and ends in 2000. He shifts between Benedict's quest "to take all the fragments, the unfinished stories, the shreds of evidence, and to fill in the gaps between them", and the various characters he learns about from Mrs Darling. Brooks writes these chapters in an ornate third-person voice.

The sequences arrive out of chronological order as Benedict becomes tangled in these past lives. Early in the novel he offers the following advice on how to read this intricate narrative: "Think of it like that," Benedict says. "A collection of stories. The links coming, as they came to me, all in their own good time."

The novel proceeds slowly, with meandering sentences -- at times needlessly long, for Brooks tends to reiterate -- and minimal dialogue. His prose demands patience and aspires to a lyrical quality that it often fails to achieve. While rhythmic, his sentences are laden with the kinds of inessentials, most notably a plethora of adverbs, that weaken the narrative's authority. Brooks is a stylist in the sense that he writes as much for his reader's ear as for their eye. His sentences can evoke several senses at once, as when he describes the "continuous scream of summer heat".

The writing is most notable when Brooks describes the relationship between Valerie, a librarian, and her tattoo artist. Brooks illustrates the creation of the image that supplies the novel's title and also provides a key to understanding Benedict's predicament in the midst of all these stories:

(The artist) then moved to the other arm, starting several inches above the wrist again, since she wanted nothing of this to be seen, moving eventually to the back, where tall trees were to stand, leaving much space open, much to be developed, a blueprint of an exotic forest he himself had never seen -- which seemed, at first, a thing out of pure imagination -- though he came, as the sessions progressed, increasingly to believe in.

There are silent spaces of stories, Benedict discovers, that speak more truthfully than the truth. "People talk and talk," Brooks writes, "about themselves as often as not, detail upon detail, and in the end, when it counts, you find you know almost nothing about them."

Benedict's discoveries call to mind those the title character reaches at the end of David Malouf's *Johnno*. Malouf writes: "Maybe, in the end, even the lies we tell define us. And better, some of them, than our most earnest attempts at the truth." With *The Fern Tattoo*, Brooks has given us an ambitious novel about how stories outlive and form us.

*This story was found at:*

**<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22869264-5003900,00.html>**