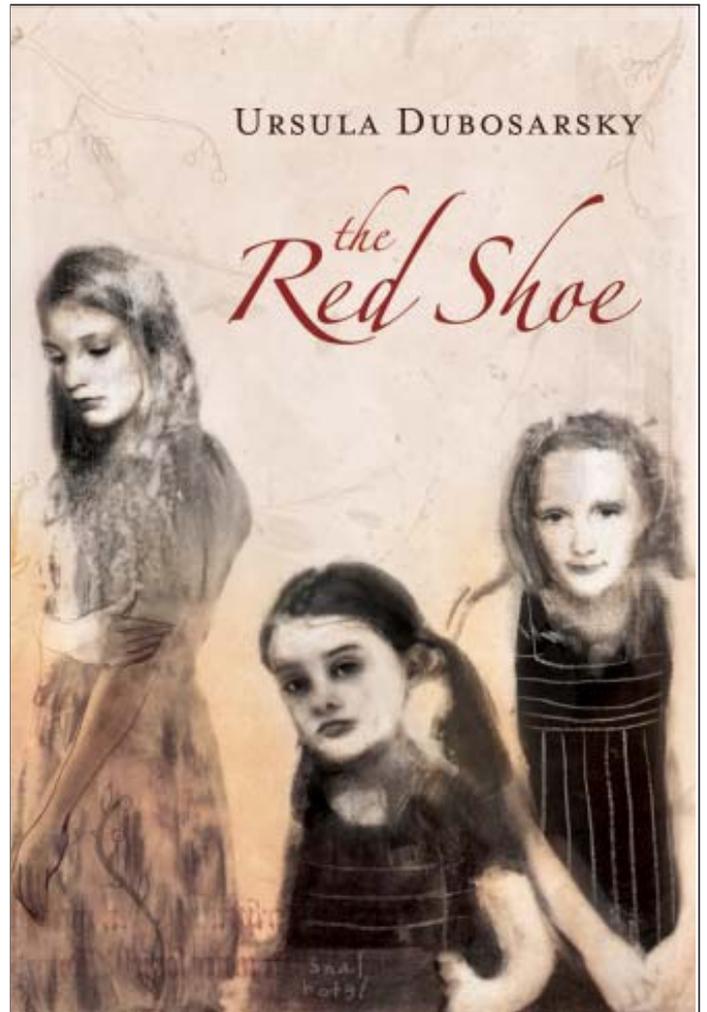


ALLEN&UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About Ursula Dubosarsky (2) On writing *The Red Shoe* (3) The Petrov Affair (4) More on setting ... (4) Reviews (5) Some suggested points for discussion (5) Other books by Ursula Dubosarsky (7) Further reading (7)

About Ursula Dubosarsky

Ursula Dubosarsky's work is recognised overseas as well as in Australia: the *Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* describes her as 'one of the most original voices in Australian writing for young people'.

Ursula Dubosarsky was born in Sydney, Australia, third child in a family of writers. Her father was also a politician and her mother a librarian. From the time she was first able to read, at age six, she wanted to be a writer. Among her favourite books as a child were *Biquette the White Goat* by Françoise, *Gone is Gone* by Wanda Gag, and *Snugglypot and Cuddlepup* by May Gibbs. She wrote stories and poems and puppet plays all through primary and high school.

After finishing school, Ursula went to Sydney University to study English and languages, including Old Icelandic and Latin. When she graduated, she moved to Canberra to work in the public service, and in the evenings after work she wrote a time slip adventure called *Zizzy Zing*. Ursula has also worked as a French and Latin teacher, a researcher for the Reader's Digest, a court typist and a university creative writing teacher.

After her stint in the public service, Ursula spent a year travelling, meeting her Argentinean husband, Avi, while working on a kibbutz in Israel. They married in London, then returned to Australia to live, where their daughter Maisie was born. At this time Ursula wrote her first published book, *Maisie and the Pinny Gig* illustrated by an old school friend, Roberta Landers. (Ursula says she is very fond of guinea pigs and often includes them in her stories.) She then wrote a comic children's novel, *High Hopes*, which she sent as an unsolicited manuscript to Penguin Books in Melbourne. The book was accepted.

In 1995, *The First Book of Samuel* was published, a story about a Jewish family in contemporary Sydney, which received several prestigious awards and is one of her most successful books to date. Ursula, Avi, Maisie and newly born son Dover then went to live in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for several months, where she wrote *Black Sails, White Sails*, a more sombre novel about a friendship between two teenage girls. On returning to Sydney in 1996 Ursula's third child, Bruno, was born.

Since this time, Ursula has published several more books, including her latest prize-winning novel, *Abyssinia*, a kind of ghost story about a doll's house. Her books have been translated into several languages. She is currently completing a PhD in English at Macquarie University and *The Red Shoe* forms part of this degree.

Ursula describes her writing habits:

I write in a room at the top of the house looking out the window. I only write in the mornings, for one or two hours.

When I finish the day's writing I'm EXHAUSTED.

I do lots and lots of rewriting, which is mainly cutting things out. I like to finish things before I show anyone at all.

On writing *The Red Shoe*

I'd been visiting a school in Bankstown to talk about my books and got lost driving home. On the car radio, as I was driving around and around, the news came in that Mrs Evdokia Petrov had died in Melbourne. Mrs Petrov was the wife of spy Vladimir Petrov, who defected from the Soviet Union to Australia in an atmosphere of spectacular international publicity in 1954. People were ringing into the radio to give their personal memory of the events of the Petrov defection. One woman rang in and said that she believed that the ASIO "safe house" that Mr Petrov was kept hidden in for some weeks, was actually the house next door to where she lived as a child in Palm Beach. (The woman was possibly mistaken – the safe house has never actually been identified, although there were many rumours). In any case, she said that the arrival of black Commonwealth cars in their remote sandy beachside suburb made a great impression on her coming up and down the gravelled roads, especially when they used to stop and give her and her sister a lift to school.

At once I thought – that'd be a great thing to write about – a family of girls (my vision was of three daughters) living next door to a Russian spy. It's hard to know what exactly it is about something you hear that makes you want to write a story about it – it's just that you immediately recognize it as something that will work for you. I think I was attracted to the idea of the private domestic family literally juxtaposed with the big grand international public event next door and all that that suggests about how we experience the world. I actually knew very little of the Petrov affair, apart from the famous black and white images of the scenes at Mascot airport as Mrs Petrov attempted to leave Australia. As the radio program continued, people kept mentioning Mrs Petrov's missing red shoe that came off as she tried to board the plane. So the title *The Red Shoe* sprang to mind, with all its resonances of the Andersen fairy tale of the red shoes that never stop dancing, and of Cinderella's lost slipper.

To research the book I read a number of books about the Petrov defection, including one written by Mr and Mrs Petrov themselves. But I wanted to get a more direct experience of the period, uninterpreted by hindsight, so I went to the State Library and sat and read several months of the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 1954, excerpts of which I've included in the text of the novel, to give the reader that same direct experience. It was fascinating reading. Part of the image of 1954 Sydney that was conjured up was so very recognizable: all the pagan, pleasure-seeking aspects of life – the football, the races, the crowds, the ferries, the Harbour, the Show, the beach, the picnics and so on. But there was also a bizarrely gothic side to the city – escapees from mental hospitals, children dying from polio, detailed divorce court proceedings, strange suicides, even stranger murders, a sex change operation saga, the ever present H-Bomb.... And of course, World War II was not far away. I really got a sense of what in many ways must have been a truly terrible time as people struggled to recover from the bereavement, separations and traumas of an appalling and prolonged world war, as well as the sense of joy that it was over, of great courage and of fierce and deliberate looking forward, to find the energy to try to make the world beautiful again.

Again, so I could experience the atmosphere of the period I attended a 12-week film course run by David Stratton (from ABC's *At the Movies*) at Sydney Uni called 'A History of World Cinema'. By fantastic coincidence the course, which has been running for several years, had just reached the years 1953-54 – so I was able to see a fascinating range of popular and other films of the time (eg *High Noon*, *Roman Holiday*, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *On the Waterfront*, *From*

Here to Eternity, Johnny Guitar etc etc)

I also went on a FANTASTIC self-guided walking tour of Sydney's 1930s fantasy picture palace, the State Theatre – at one point in the novel the girls are taken there to see *Roman Holiday*. It's such a strange place, beautiful and threatening all at once and the scene was definitely enriched by this visit.

Lastly I drove up to Sydney's northern beaches – Avalon, Palm Beach – and took a ferry out to the popular picnic spot, the Basin, where a pivotal scene in the novel takes place. Just as I was finishing the book, an article appeared in the real estate section of the paper, saying that a house rumoured to be the "safe house" where Mr Petrov was kept hidden, was for sale – so I took the children and did a house inspection of a large, beautiful, highly atmospheric 1940s Avalon home, complete with chook run and magnificent magnolia tree. Was it the house? Nobody really knows.

The Petrov Affair

The Petrov Affair is of continuing public interest, and for the fiftieth anniversary in 2004 there were a number of articles in the press. For example:

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html?oneclick=true>

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/08/12/1092102595706.html?from=moreStories>

There was also an anniversary exhibition at Old Parliament House in Canberra – plenty of photos, anecdotes etc. are on the website:

<http://www.oph.gov.au/petrov/content.asp>.

The Petrov Affair is still seen by some to have current social and political relevance. According to Robert Manne (author of *The Petrov Affair*, Text Publishing, 2004),

If the Petrov affair throws an uncomfortable light upon the present, so does the present throw light upon the Petrov past. Since September 11, 2001, the anxious atmosphere of contemporary Australia uncannily resembles the Cold War of the early 1950s

(*Sydney Morning Herald*, 5/4/2004)

More on setting ...

In her entry at <http://www.members.optusnet.com.au/dubosar/upper.htm>, Ursula lists a number of interesting websites for information on Australian life in the 1950s, the State Theatre, *The Argonauts*, the polio epidemic, sites around Sydney mentioned in the novel, the childhood phenomenon of invisible friends, and the many literary references to red shoes.

Reviews

'When Ursula Dubosarsky writes, the ordinary becomes fascinating: every small and unremarkable thing is imbued with the sweetest, softest charm. Reading her novels is like walking through a dream: you know you're not allowed to stay, but you don't want to leave it, and when it's gone, you can't stop thinking about it. In this beautiful story, Dubosarsky proves yet again that she is the most graceful, most original writer for young people in Australia – probably in the world.'

Sonya Hartnett

'I always want to spend more time with Ursula Dubosarsky's people. They are wise, awkward and funny, and they give off sparks of insight that I want to read aloud to whoever's near ... The Red Shoe says all sorts of juicy things about how history is laid down one sleepy afternoon, one conversation, one crisis at a time.'

Margo Lanagan

'Her books, let us make no mistake about this, are classics.'

Robyn Sheahan-Bright [taken from a review of an earlier book by Ursula Dubosarsky]

Some suggested points for discussion

 Look at the book as an artefact. Does the cover appeal to you? What do you think it conveys? What did you make of the endorsements and the blurb? What about the endpapers, with the collage of clippings about the Queen?

 Why do you think Ursula Dubosarsky put the Andersen fairytale at the beginning? What did you make of *The Red Shoes* story? Does it suggest anything different once you have read the novel?

 The book has another 'Once upon a time' kind of beginning ('In a house far away... lived three sisters with their father and mother', page 15). Does this have any real bearing on the overall story, or perhaps on Matilda's view of the world? Are there other fairytale elements – motifs, phrases - that remind you of classic stories?

 Re-read the newspaper extracts at the start. What do they suggest about the world of the novel?

 Do you think the newspaper clippings are there to provide 'clues' to the plot, or simply to suggest mood – or both? What other purposes might the author have had in including them? How do they sit with the fairytale at the start? Do you end up feeling that the sober, 'objective' news reports (as selected and juxtaposed by Dubosarsky) are as much fairytale as anything Andersen wrote, or do you see them belonging to another realm entirely?

 Matilda is said to be 'like a spy' (page 16). Is that how she comes across? Are we all spies, sussing out information about other people's lives? Are young children especially well equipped to ferret out secrets?

 What role does the invisible Floreal play in the story? What kind of voice or persona does he have?

 This is a novel full of secrets. Some hidden facts are openly revealed by the end – e.g. we find out what happened at the Basin (though we don't know what everyone's experience of that day was, by any means – we don't

know 'the whole truth'). Others are plainly hinted at – for example, we are clear that the men next door are Petrov and his minders (or are we?); it looks as though Elizabeth's breakdown and possibly Frances's silence followed and were 'caused' by the drama at the Basin. Yet some secrets remain – what exactly is the nature of the mother's relationship with Uncle Paul, for instance? – or are known to the reader but not to most of the characters (Matilda's foray into the mad old man's house, Frances's encounter with Mark's mother). Speculate about some of the remaining secrets or unanswered questions that you had when you finished the novel. ('Who was the man shot in the arcade?' would have to be one!)

 What sort of person is Uncle Paul? Do you believe that he would be capable of acting as he is said on page 169 to have acted? Do you find that confronting?

 What do you make of the presence of the Petrovs in the novel? What elements in their story illuminate or counterbalance the family world of the three girls?

 What does the novel suggest about the aftershock to World War II?

 Has the author taken a risk in adopting a six-year-old's viewpoint for the novel? What are the benefits and disadvantages in doing this? Does Floreal help? Does Matilda have special qualities that other six-year-olds rarely have?

 The author says the main themes of the book for her are *secrets; love; private life and the impact (or not) of public life upon it, particularly for children; being Australian*. We've already touched on secrets; now consider the other three themes.

 How would you characterise the 1950s as portrayed in *The Red Shoe*? (If you remember the 1950s, consider how does Dubosarsky's portrayal match?) Can you see any similarities to or resonances with today?

 What does the red shoe signify in the novel?

 What role does chance play in the novel?

Other books by Ursula Dubosarksy

Theodora's Gift (2005) (sequel to *The First Book of Samuel*)

The First Book of Samuel (1995)

Abyssinia (2003)

The Game of the Goose (2000)

Black Sails, White Sails (1997)

The White Guinea-Pig (1994)

Further reading

What Maisie Knew by Henry James

Spies by Michael Frayn

The Greengage Summer by Rumer Godden