

Czenya Cavouras, *Rainbow Bird*

Launch, Adelaide, 18 October 2007

J M Coetzee

It is a pleasure for me to assist with the launch of *Rainbow Bird*. If you have had a look at it, you will know that it is a young person's book – a book by a young person, a book intended for young people. I am not usually thought of as a young person's person, the right person to launch a young person's book. But having had a chance to read and think about Czenya Cavouras's book has led me to an insight that I will be talking about in a moment, an insight that has been valuable to me.

The moving force behind the publication of *Rainbow Bird* is Australians Against Racism, and the moving spirit behind the moving force is Eva Sallis. Usually organizations with names like Australians Against Racism put out worthy but not very readable books with titles like *The Baxter Detention Centre: Five Years of Infamy*, page after page of grey prose interrupted every now and again with a statistical table. Eva's inspiration has been to start off AAR's publication list with a book that is not only eminently worthy in its aims but highly readable too, containing no grey prose, in fact very little prose of any kind, and instead of statistical tables pictures – pictures in brilliant colour.

Rainbow Bird is the story of a young person who together with the rest of his or her family leaves home and lands up behind barbed wire in a detention centre on foreign soil that is clearly Australian soil. In the Centre he or she spends a miserable time until unexpectedly a bird flies past, the bird of hope, a portent of freedom.

That is all. That is the sum of the story. The first time I read it through I had misgivings. I thought to myself, *Surely there is a lot missing from this. Who is this child? What kind of people are her father and mother? What did they do back home? Where was home for them? Why did they decide to leave? Are there other children in the family? How did they get to Australia? What did they expect to find here? What were their plans for the future?*

But when I had had a chance to reflect, I came to the insight I mentioned earlier, which I describe now not because it will necessarily mean much to Czenya and her friends but because it may mean something to the adults present. The insight is this: that when you are young you live stories, including your own life-story, from the centre, not from the outside. Your mother and father are *your* mother and *your* father, not a man and a woman with an existence independent of you who happen to have a certain biological and social relation to you. If you are shut up in a miserable place in the desert ringed with barbed wire, the misery is *yours*, it consumes you and colours everything you see and hear, it does not have a history and is not open to objective analysis. A young person's experience of the world is different from an adult's experience; and a young person's book is a book that embodies this other kind of world-view.

Rainbow Bird closes on a full-page image, one that you must all have seen already, since it is also used in the advertising flyer for the book. The image is, as I have mentioned, of the bird of hope, the bird that promises liberation from the barbed-wire prison and a life of freedom to come. It is a magnificent bird, a bird in all the colours of the rainbow. Is it a real bird? Do we have birds like this in Australia, birds of hope? Used we to have birds of hope, and are they dying out?

I checked the index of Simpson and Day's *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*. Rainbow Bird, Hope Bird, Bird of Hope: nothing. I flipped through the illustrations. Lots of multicoloured birds, particularly among the parrots and cockatoos, but none quite as spectacular as Czenya's. Evidently Simpson and Day, those eminent bird-spotters, have not spotted, or have not yet spotted, a Rainbow Bird, a Bird of Hope. Simpson and Day have not

but – miraculously – Czenya has, otherwise she wouldn't have been able to paint it for us. And for that we all owe her our thanks.