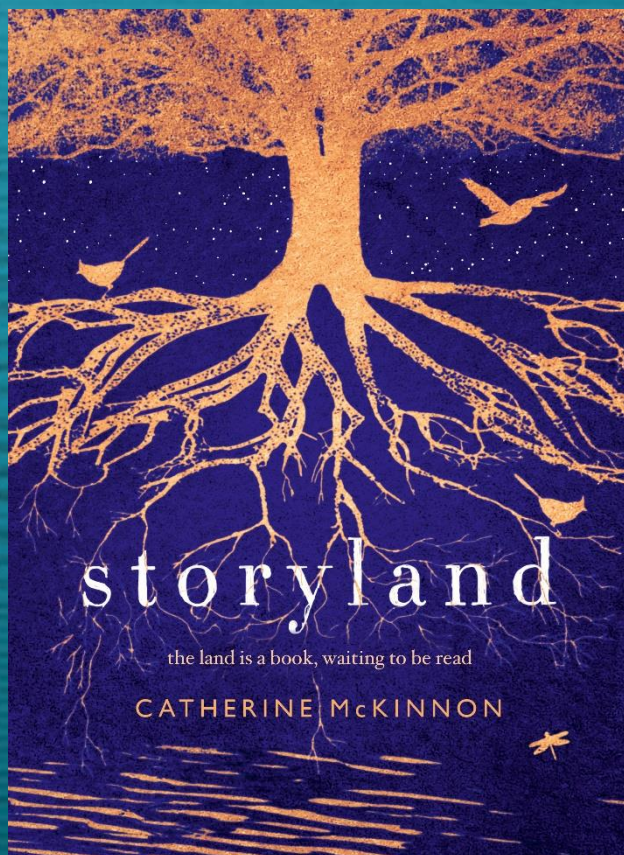


2018  
**SHORTLIST**

MILES FRANKLIN  
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



**EXTRACT**



My oar stabs the side of the Reliance. We push Tom Thumb away from the ship. Venus is out but the sky is still light. Lieutenant Flinders takes the helm. Mr Bass and I row until we are clear of the ships docked at Sydney Cove and then we boat the oars and hoist sail. Tom Thumb's sail snaps at the breeze and air-filled we bounce across the water.

'To dare is to do!' Mr Bass shouts our motto.

'To dare is to do!' The lieutenant and I reply as if we are one.

It is Thursday, the twenty-fourth of March, the year 1796. This day we have embarked on our second Tom Thumb sail. Mr Bass and Lieutenant Flinders are charged with locating the mouth of the river that Henry Hacking (a ship pilot who likes to hunt) has discovered inland. Hacking has guessed the mouth to be south of Botany Bay, near Cape Banks. Mr Bass says that if we find that river, and it is deep enough to take large vessels, then our names will be shiny buttons on English coats.

Seawater sprays across the gunwale. It is the enchanted hour, where blue water glows and the rocky shores and sandy beaches have a yellowish gleam. On the eastern side of the cove I spy the governor's stone house. Near it, the farmed gardens. On the western side is the hospital, where my friend Na will be sweeping floors. Around the cove, dirt paths snake by houses made of brick, mud, wattle and post, and limed inside and out. Beyond the settlement, it is all forest. The trees have rare and fanciful roots that rise high above the ground. At each step there are fallen trunks, slumped sideways like drunken sailors, or prostrate on the ground; others that are lightning splintered or perished. The foliage is silver-tinged and evergreen. In this land, nature is upended. Birds sing through the night, animals hunt and forage in moonlight.

Dribbling through the trees and over mud flats, and dividing east of the cove from west, is the Tank Stream. Once it was a pure stream, but now it is fouled by pig dung, food scraps and more, so that our small colony is desperate for clean water. The governor hopes that the river we seek may provide new areas to settle. According to Mr Bass, therein lies the importance of our task.

We sail on past stony Pinchgut Island. A man stands on the shore. I see a hand rise to wave. Or is it a trick of the eye? Only the wicked are left there. No one on Garden Island. Behind us, the ships moored in the harbour soon disappear. Larboard and starboard is only darkened forest. Indian fires glimmer between the jungle of skeleton trees.



Our first Tom Thumb, owned by Mr Bass and friends, was taken to Timor on the Nautilus and did not return. The colony's boat builder, good Mr Paine, clinker built a new Thumb, with steamed frames of spotted gum, red cedar planks, and polished copper fittings. We are kitted with a mast of flooded gum, a linen lugsail, a sweep sail and well-crafted oars. Less than twelve foot, so a small boat to sail in. There is no anchor spare in the colony so our anchor is a lump of rock that the sea has speared a hole through and, under Mr Bass's instruction, I have threaded it with thick rope. We have only two muskets to contest pirates or cannibals, supplies for ten days, no more, and the danger is great.

The governor himself tried to dissuade us from the journey.

'We are more than willing,' Lieutenant Flinders said.

'Good fate does not side with every explorer,' the governor warned.

'We are confident,' Mr Bass assured him.

Still the governor resisted. 'No,' he said, his gaze on me. 'The risk of young lives lost, with so much yet to give, outweighs the cause.'

'Sir!' Mr Bass stepped forward, his great shape commanding the room as he spoke our motto in Latin, 'Audere est facere!'

The governor laughed abruptly and we saw he had relented.

The water melts into the night sky. Mr Bass tips his head to stargaze. He is almost as long as Thumb. Lieutenant Flinders sits, hand on knee, reading the wind. I button my jacket against the cold, see the beacon flaming on South Head. On this sail I aim to prove my worth. For it is as Mr Bass says: 'In the new world, a man is what he dares to be, no more, no less.'

The water goes slap, slap against the side of Thumb. Slap, slap, to dare is to do.

Near Shark Bay the wind drops. Mr Bass and I get upon the oars and pull to shore. The surf foams and spits as we haul our boat up onto the sand. Mr Bass and the lieutenant stand on the beach and shake hands.

'Mr Bass, congratulations.'

'Lieutenant Flinders, congratulations.'

They are pleased to have nine days exploring, away from duties on the Reliance, and with no pipe whistling orders. The bay is edged by rocky cliffs. Mr Bass and the lieutenant take off to climb the nearest, and soon become inky shapes. The dark sea is furrowed by starlight. Behind me, tall eucalypts stand like bark-coated marines guarding the beach, their leaves tinted by the moon.