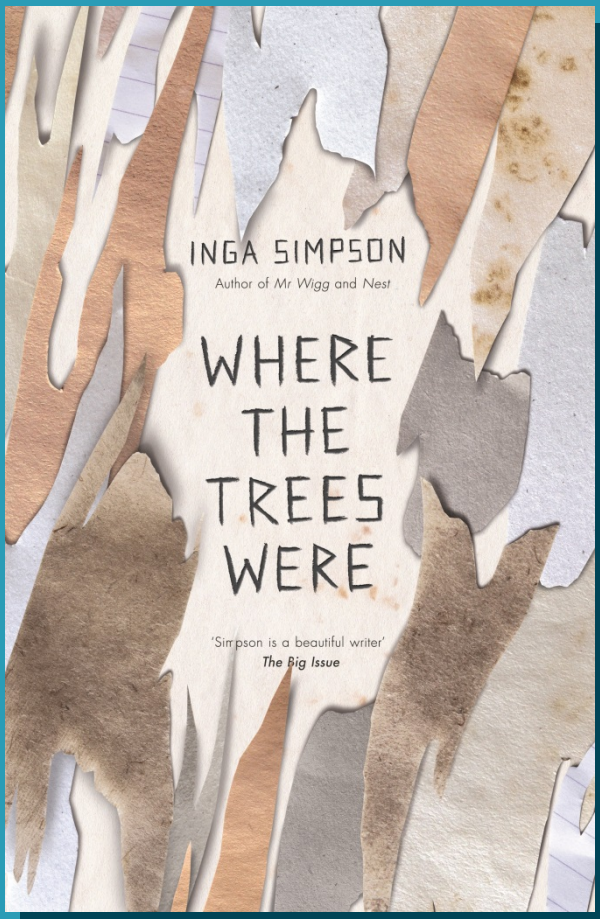
2017
LONGLIST

MILES FRANKLIN LITERARY AWARD

PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



EXTRACT

It was Kieran who found the trees.

We swam and then ran, still dripping, behind him. It was hot away from the water, and the path dusty. My skin dried and began to itch. I was imagining a calf stuck in the mud, needing rescue, or an old vehicle for playing in. A raft or even a pirate ship. A body, perhaps.

We entered a kind of grove further up the bank of the river, the sort that is quiet inside, and makes you feel quiet inside yourself. There was a covering of fine grass underfoot, still green, despite the season. Kieran stopped, turned and crossed his arms.

'What?' Josh craned his neck to see what was behind Kieran's back.

'Turn around,' he said.

So we did.

It was a tree. Or rather, a series of trees. The largest of them, a big old yellow box, was long dead. A great grey ghost. The other four, still slender and youthful, staggered back either side of the clearing. They leaned over the raised mound of earth, as if protecting it. A section of each trunk had been cut away, in the shape of a shield. There were designs carved inside, curved and straight lines that were not quite pictures and not quite words but told some sort of story. They had been there a long time. You could still see rough tool marks, and where the trees had kept on growing, bulging out over the carvings.

We had only ever approached from the other side, marching past without looking back. Without noticing. As if the trees didn't want to be seen. Or we hadn't been ready to see them.

Now we couldn't look away.

There was one tree for each of us. As if they were for us. What breeze there had been stilled. The birds and insects paused. For a moment, there was no sound. Even Matty had nothing to say.

I pushed past the others, to touch the ledge between the bark and the carved surface of the largest tree. The cuts were deep and wide, right into the heartwood, like fingers making a river. Scrolls and diamonds filled the space around it. It all meant something. It meant a lot. We knew that straight away. We didn't quite understand, the way we didn't fully understand a lot of things. At the same time we almost did, although it was more than we could have explained. And we knew that we all felt the same, without having to speak. It was as if the trees said everything for us.

Although dead, the timber was warm. It might just have been the afternoon sun, but it felt magical.

Only when a peewee called and all the sounds started up again was the spell broken.

'Far out,' Josh said.

I turned to look at Ian. We were all looking at him. But his face wasn't telling us anything.

'What is it?' Kieran said.

Ian shrugged. 'I don't know. An important place, for sure. I could ask Mum?'

We walked the tree circle before stepping inside. It was another time, out of the world. We were younger, we were older – we were together. We heard the wind, the sky, the leaves, the earth, and all of the birds and creatures who lived there. And we were part of it.

Afterwards, we lay on the grassy mound, looking up at the roof of the world through the tips of our trees, until our stomachs were growling and I thought Ian would remind us of lunch.

It was Kieran who first sat up. 'This is our secret, right? Our secret place.'

I frowned. I had started to imagine telling my father at dinner, triumphant. Finding something on our farm that even he didn't know about.

'For sure,' said Josh.

Ian said nothing. I couldn't tell if his eyes were open or shut behind his dark curls.

'Jay?' Kieran stood over me, blocking the sun.

'Okay,' I said.

'All in?' Kieran pulled me up, and the others followed. We gathered around the bigger tree.

No one asked Matty – he just reached up and put his right hand on the trunk with ours. I put my left arm around Josh, and he put his around Ian, and Ian put his around Kieran, and Kieran hugged Matty, until we were a circle around the tree.

Kieran cleared his throat. 'We swear, on these trees, to always be friends. To protect each other – and this place.'