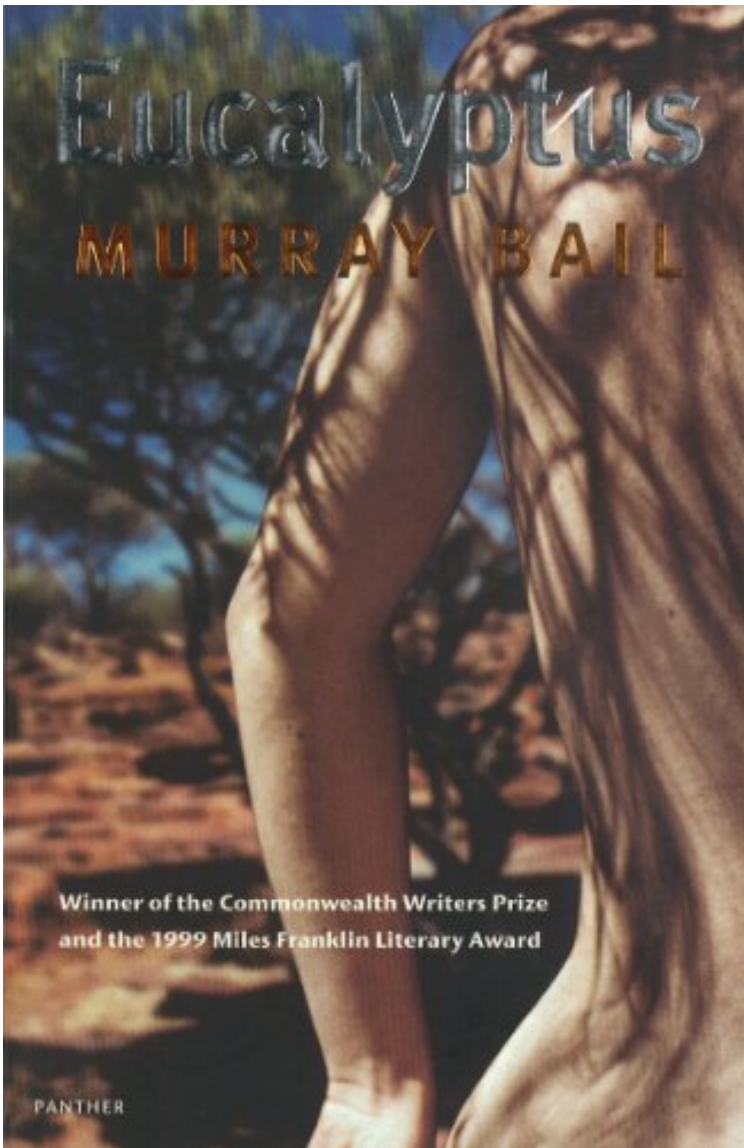


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Eucalyptus



Par Murray Bail
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOn a property in New South Wales, a man named Holland lives with his daughter Ellen. As years pass and Ellen grows into a beautiful young woman, her father announces his decision: she will marry the first man who can name all the species of the eucalypt, down to the last tree..com"The idea that Holland's daughter was like the princess locked in the tower of a damp castle was of course false. After all, she was living on a property in western New South Wales." Once upon a time, on a property in western New South Wales, a man named Holland plants hundreds of varieties of eucalyptus trees, then decrees that only the suitor who can name each and every one of them will be worthy to marry his beautiful daughter, Ellen. Men try and fail: there is the gentle schoolteacher who "had correctly named eighty-seven eucalypts

and was doing it well when he went blank at the fatly handsome Jarrah up against the fence behind the house"; and the New Zealander who "came up against, and was defeated by, one of the many Stringybarks..." Old men, young men, commercial travelers, sheep-shearers--even a "smiling Chinaman ... all the way from Darwin." Not one is successful. Then, one day, along comes Mr. Roy Cave, a man renowned in the eucalyptus world, someone who "employed with lip-smacking relish the terms 'petiole,' 'inflorescences,' 'falacte' and 'lanceolate,' and he was also comfortable with 'sessile,' 'fusiform' and 'concolorous.'" Even in so wonderfully fractured a fairy tale as Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*, it's obvious that Roy Cave is hardly the stuff romantic dreams are made of. Indeed, despite her father's warning to "beware of any man who deliberately tells a story," Ellen's Prince Charming turns out to be a mysterious young stranger who finds her wandering among her father's trees and spins her tale after tale, each one tied to a different kind of eucalypt. As the weeks go by, Mr. Cave continues to successfully identify every tree on the property, thus drawing ever closer to his prize. Meanwhile, Ellen's other suitor captures first her imagination and then her heart with stories of apprentice hairdressers who fall in love with plain-Jane heiresses; solicitors' daughters involved with married men; and lonely canary breeders who almost find happiness with spinster piano teachers. What all of these off-kilter stories have in common is a theme of missed opportunities, and lovers who realize too late that they were made for each other. Will Ellen, too, end up like one of these the sad-hearted heroines, or will her would-be lover find a way to thwart Mr. Cave's relentless victory march through the Eucalypts to claim her hand? There is so much to love about Bail's novel that it's difficult to identify exactly which of its qualities make it such a complete delight. Is it Ellen's "speckled beauty ... so covered in small brown-black moles she attracted men, every sort of man"? Is it the detailed descriptions of the landscape? The way Bail uses them to comment on human nature, on the nature of storytelling and of language itself ("a paragraph is not so different from a paddock--similar shape, similar function")? Or is it the wacky charm of the Scheherazade-like suitor's urban tales? ("Still in the vicinity of low-height eucalypts he went on to mention, in a thoughtful voice, how in an outer suburb of Hobart an actuary with a well-known insurance company needed a stepladder to woo a widow who passed by his house every day.") Whatever the source of Bail's peculiar magic, *Eucalyptus* casts a spell that will carry readers from first page to last and leave them wishing for a thousand and one more stories just like it. --Alix Wilber

From Publishers Weekly

Bail is a sort of Australian magic realist, and if that sounds like a contradiction in terms, it is a fair summary of the rather disconcerting nature of the novel in question. The eucalyptus is Australia's emblematic tree, existing in hundreds of varieties, some extremely rare, and it is Bail's fancy that a man called Holland, living on a remote estate in New South Wales, planted on his land a collection of all such trees known to man. Having performed this odd, obsessive act, he then set, for his beautiful and only daughter Ellen, one of those traps essential to fairy tales: only a man who could correctly name each tree in his vast collection could have her hand in marriage. The problem was that Ellen didn't much care for the man who looked as if he was going to win; meanwhile another man came wandering through the trees and started spinning her wondrous tales. Bail's aim in this extremely odd book is elusive. Each of the many short chapters has a eucalypt heading, and the book is full of quaint touches of lore and fey observations about nature, landscape and art, not to mention a number of short, sometimes tantalizing tales. But the net effect, for all of some pretty writing and some gauzy atmospherics, is literary in the worst sense: coy, pretentious and with more than a touch of self-satisfaction. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.