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BOOKS

The latest book by the award-winning writer, illustrator, musician and composer Matt Ottley is a stunning exploration of mental illness. By *Jennifer Higgie*.

Writer, illustrator, musician and composer Matt Ottley



Matt Ottley.

In Matt Ottley's latest picture book, *The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness*, a boy goes on a journey. Or rather, as with so many journeys, it's imposed upon him and he has to deal with it as best he can.

The boy is born with a seed inside him that grows into a tree of ambivalent power. At times it entwines and chokes him: it will not let him breathe. Doctors prescribe medicine, which works for a while, but then the tree, once again, takes over. To escape its grip, the boy shrinks and shrieks. He shapeshifts into a lizard, a flying cow and a bird that drifts into the realm of a maniacal sovereign who banishes him to the far reaches of her kingdom in search of beauty.

By the end of the tale, after starting and surviving a war, the boy – by

CREDIT: TINA WILSON

Jennifer Higgie is a London-based Australian writer. Her most recent book is *The Mirror and the Palette:* 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits.

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now a young man – achieves a level of equilibrium and hope: he has learnt to understand the fragility of all things. The tree is still with him but golden fruit and flowers bloom from its gnarled branches. A jubilant voice sings to the heavens: "I am still here, hear me."

Like the ever-changing world Ottley evokes, *The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness* is an intricate at times heart-rending work formed of many parts. Talking to me via Zoom from his home on the side of a mountain in Bundjalung country in northern New South Wales, Ottley – a deeply thoughtful man with long white hair – describes it as a "multimodal" project.

The publication comes with a CD recording of the book that is narrated by his partner, Tina Wilson, over a swooping, soaring 50minute score composed by Ottley and the Perth pianist Alf Demasi. The narrative is incomplete without this sonic evocation of terror and joy, which is performed by the Czech Philharmonic Choir of Brno. The uplifting final words "I am still here", for example, are sung by a tenor and not included in the book.

Ottley is a polymath: an author, artist, composer and musician who is best known for the 40 or so books for children and young adults he has illustrated, written, or both. A story of resilience through acceptance, *The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness* is intended for anyone over the age of 15. In particular, it's for anyone who has suffered or is suffering from mental illness. It's also for readers who would like to understand more deeply what it means to encounter the world through the lens of such isolating – and at times exhilarating – pain.

Ottley writes from bone-deep experience. He was diagnosed with type 1 bipolar disorder in his early teens. A lifelong illness that manifests in mood swings, manic episodes and psychosis, Ottley's condition was not properly treated until he was in his 40s. For far too long, he was left, in the main, to fend for himself.

As a result he went through periods of deep depression. He twice attempted suicide. During one extreme episode, he could not speak or comprehend words; only music made sense. He wrote *The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness* in the hope that someone suffering might read it "and see metaphorically there's your journey. If you're unable to talk about it, there's solace in the discovery that you're not alone." He takes a deep breath. "My story," he says, "is not uncommon. I've met people my own age who have been on the run for a large part of their life."

Ottley was born in 1962 in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. His Australian mother, Jacqueline Johnston, pursued a patrol officer to Kukukuku country when she was only 18. Ottley isn't sure how she got there – it was a closed-off territory – but family lore has it she stowed away in a supply aircraft. The relationship didn't work. She met someone else and had three boys. Ottley is the middle child.

The family settled in Mount Hagen in the Western Highlands, where there was "something of a mini goldrush". Despite the volatility of his parents' relationship, Ottley describes a childhood rich in creativity and wonder. His mother was a painter who had once aspired to be a ballerina, and she filled their home with music and took her children on painting trips. She made Ottley a small easel and, from the age of four, he made pictures alongside her as his brothers played.

"My story is not uncommon. I've met people my own age who have been on the run for a large part of their life."

He remembers watching sing-sings in villages, entranced by the Melanesian music and men in bird-of-paradise plumes leaping high and playing the kundu drums. When he was about six he had malaria, which possibly triggered his synaesthesia. He sees "colours and shapes associated with sound", which means he understands sound through what he can see rather than what he hears. When he listens to Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony*, for instance, it creates "a coloured, football shape with things coming off it". "In a rehearsal," he tells me, "I can tell someone their F is a bit flat because it's the wrong colour." An oboe is "on the red/orange spectrum", while the "strings can be grey through to chocolate".

At the age of nine, while the family was still living in PNG, Ottley was sexually assaulted. He has decided, after years of silence, to discuss the repercussions of what happened to him as he believes "these things need to be talked about". I ask him if he feels the abuse triggered his first bipolar episode, which occurred when he was 13, just after the family moved to Australia. He agrees it's possible, explaining the illness "is a biochemical issue that is genetic but can remain switched off. Deep trauma can switch it on."

Life in Sydney was difficult. Ottley felt estranged from the society he had arrived in: he missed his friends, had no knowledge of popular culture or television and was more interested in Beethoven than Skyhooks. Also, he says, the complete lack of respect for elders – so different to what he had witnessed in the land of his birth – affected him deeply. But his alienation wasn't simply about geography. "I can't distinguish whether my sense as an outsider was to do with leaving PNG or having a very serious mental illness," he says.

He failed high school because when he became episodic, he would disappear into his room and try to ride it out. His mother was loving but did not understand what he was going through. Neither did his father and his uncles, who were "hard-drinking practical men; men's men". One was an Olympic boxer, another a wrestler, and their conversation revolved around cattle stations and horses. Ottley left Sydney and found work as a jackaroo.

On his return from the bush, he enrolled in the Julian Ashton Art School; after another stint jackarooing, he studied creative writing and music at Wollongong University. Here he met the writer Rodney Hall, who became a lifelong mentor and friend. Hall opened Ottley's eyes to the possibilities of composition, contemporary literature and visual arts. This was when Ottley fell in love with the paintings of Brett Whiteley and Albert Tucker. Later he was entranced by the fantastical worlds conjured by Kirill Chelushkin and Shaun Tan.

When I ask him what it was about these artists, in particular, that attracted him, his answer is swift and clear. "It was the edginess and the wild emotionality contained in the most beautiful technique" – words that describe his own exquisitely detailed paintings. Discussing the role of influence, he paraphrases Igor Stravinsky, who believed that new music emerges when composers try and fail to ape the compositions from the past they admire. I agree that much creativity involves someone getting it wrong in order to get it right. Ottley nods: "It's a beautiful encapsulation of how art evolves."

He found deep solace in music, in particular his discovery of the work of the Hungarian–Austrian composer György Ligeti, which reminded him of Melanesian music. I ask him about the correspondences. He thinks for a moment, his hands carving shapes in the air, as if he's conducting celestial musicians. He slowly explains that the similarities lie in the "atmospheric dissonance" of both musical forms, and how, in both Ligeti's compositions and in Melanesian songs, the structure is "linear in nature", not "circular like sonata": a mood slowly builds that "doesn't indicate where it's headed". What links them, he says, is "a deep sense of numinous mystery". Ottley was hooked and gravitated to the Eastern European contemporary music scene.

Despite his immersion in an urban, creative life, without graduating, Ottley once again upped sticks and worked as a stockman at a remote cattle station in the far north of Australia – which he did intermittently for the next 10 years. Worn out by his illness, he felt he had to curry favour with his father in order to expunge his deep sense of shame and failure. Years later – after Ottley had made a good living as an equestrian artist in Britain and published books such as *What Faust Saw*, about a dog that sees aliens that hide when humans appear – he returned to his experiences in the bush with his first major "multimodal" work, *Requiem for a Beast*.

A harrowing graphic novel that opens with the proclamation "It's our memories that make us", it's accompanied by a heart-rending soundtrack that combines excerpts from a 12th-century requiem, a composition for chamber orchestra and soprano, and Bundjalung narration and songs. It explores themes that are at once mythic and all too real: a young stockman's journey of self-discovery as he tackles a feral bull, and an Aboriginal woman sharing her memories of the Stolen Generations.

Ottley drew not only on the masculine toxicity and vicious racism he had encountered on the stations but also on his friendship with a Bundjalung elder who gave him permission to recount her story. "Auntie Pauline believed that the original invaders of this country were so afraid of us, the only way they could cope was to control us with violence," he says. "The bull becomes representative of earlysettler control of the country." But the bull also "represented my illness and this relationship with my father that I needed to kill, basically".

Over the past 10 years or so, Ottley has found peace and stability. He and Tina Wilson live on 10 hectares of land on the side of a lush mountain. His focus is on creating work that is at once therapeutic and mind-expanding. In 2014, he and the writer Danny Parker devised the ongoing project *The Sound of Picture Books*, a live performance that brings picture books to life via words, images and music, that has been performed annually in Western Australia through The Literature Centre.

His 2020 picture book, *How to Make a Bird* (with Meg McKinlay), was the winner of the Children's Book Council of Australia's Picture Book of the Year award and joint winner of the Prime Minister's Award for Children's Literature. He's also working on another interactive project, *The Shape of Music*, a synaesthetic performance that invites musicians to develop their spatial awareness and improvisation techniques.

Given the intertwining of words, images and music in his work, I ask if he has any plans to turn his books into animations. He shakes his head: "Possibly, but for now it's really important that the viewer has time to look at and reflect upon the paintings." We talk about how swift and hyperstimulated contemporary life is, how little space there is for reflection.

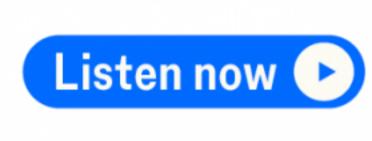
He pauses for a moment and asks if I know Max Richter's *Sleep* – an eight-and-a-half-hour composition from 2015 that's been described as "music to dream to". I do. We agree it's wonderful. Ottley shakes his head in awe. "It's the most beautiful statement against the speed and superficiality of the way we experience life." He pauses, smiles, suddenly looks happy. "I love that."

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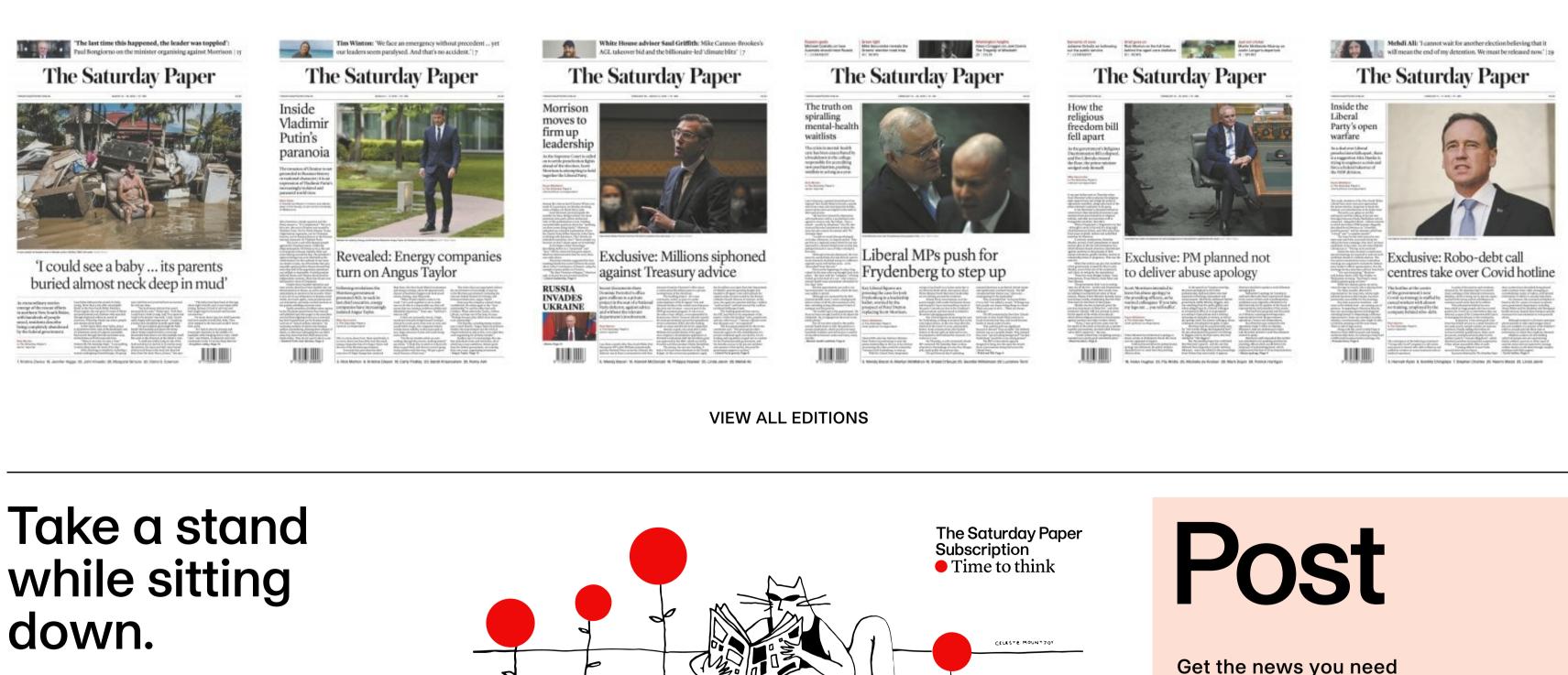
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