

BOOK REVIEW

Hay, Ashley. *Gum: The Story of Eucalypts and Their Champions*. Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 2002.

No matter where you look in Australia you're more than likely to see a eucalyptus tree. Scrawny or majestic, smooth as pearl or rough as a pub brawl, they have defined a continent for thousands of years, and still shape our imagination.

Since time began Aborigines have woven myths about the abilities of the eucalyptus. Since Australia was colonised, botanists have battled for more than two hundred years in a race to count, classify and own the species. This is the story of that battle and of other eucalyptographers - explorers, poets, painters, foresters, conservationists, scientists (and engine drivers) - who have been obsessed by them, championing their powers. Gum trees have promised to cure malaria, solve the drainage problems that had defeated the Roman emperors, forest the Sahara and divine gold.

Gum is about a magical, mythical, medicinal tree. But more than that, it's the story of new worlds, strange people and big ideas.



Thus write the publishers of Ashley Hay's book about that great Australian icon, the gum tree. This is an unusual book; it examines both multiple species of eucalypt and the people whose lives have been entwined with these trees. From early Aborigines, to Sir Joseph Banks, May Gibbs and the fire fighters of today, no one who has encountered gums can be immune to their beauty and their power.

According to Hay: 'the more you know about eucalypts, the more you want to know - and the more you know, the more impossible it becomes to walk past a gum tree without stopping, and looking, and seeing what it is.'

She believes that the experience of gums is one all Australians share, and an experience that all Australians should work to preserve for future generations of Australians.

Hay is a journalist, and this book reflects her writing style. It is factual, conversational and very readable. If it has one flaw it is in its lack of a deeply reflective dimension. The book could have done so much more, but what it does is well done, and *Gum* is worth reading.