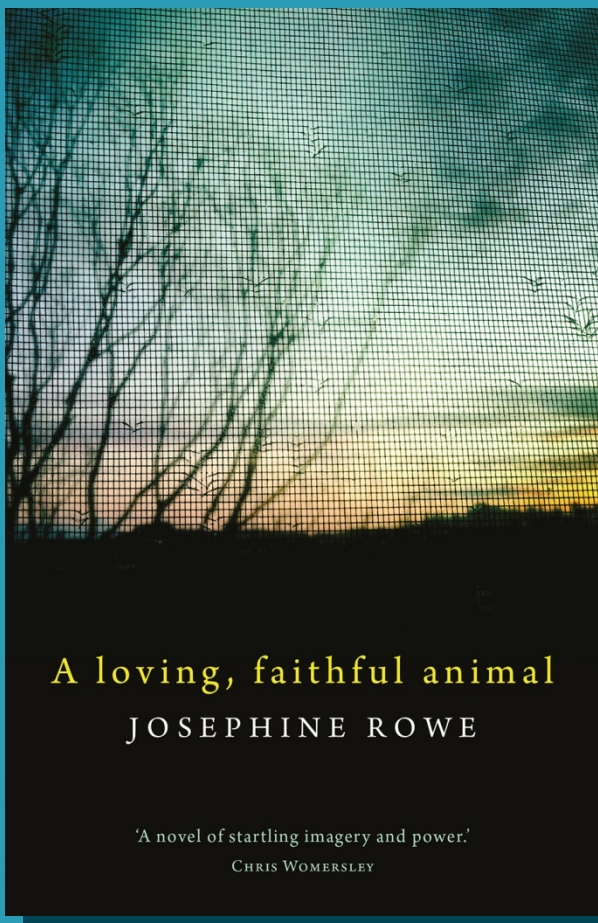


2017  
**LOONGLIST**

MILES FRANKLIN  
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



**A loving, faithful animal**

JOSEPHINE ROWE

'A novel of startling imagery and power.'

CHRIS WOMERSLEY

**EXTRACT**



You know what it was. Sure you've seen it, crouched black amidst the sea of high yellow grass, keeping its belly to the earth. It slips easily from the rifle-sights of farmers, of rooshooting boys. Is only ever caught in the outer millimetres of grainy film; a lanky shadow and a flick of tail. Though scientists and game hunters have come in pursuit of it, set up with tents and traps. The creature is too crafty, evading their snares, walking so lightly it seldom dislodges enough earth to leave as much as a print, any trace of itself. It must bury its scat, they reason. The researchers carry back nothing but samples of grass and hair, tissue from the torn bellies of savaged pets. *Evidence inconclusive.*

*Panther* is what the locals call it.

You know that it is not your father's panther, the one that came during the war, packed up in a crate from Sumatra after its mother had been shot out of fear or fun. A panther lives twenty years if it's lucky, and that Sumatran cub was not lucky—obviously—getting itself orphaned and then caught, smuggled back to Australia and a lonely life of mascotting at the Puckapunyal barracks. It must've got weak, got bored there on the base, caged up. Wondered where its own kind were, when they were going to come for it. It must've been afraid of the night criers, strange shrieking birds and booming owls, the roaring of bull koalas, languages it didn't understand. Meanwhile, its silhouette was stencilled onto everything that didn't move, and some things that did: your father's arm, for instance. When you were little, the tattoo panther was sleek and wonderful, clawing its way up his bicep. He could make it writhe, make it roar. But as the war grew further and further away the ink had faded, softening and spreading at the edges so that the cat was bigger than it had been, but less ferocious, the muscles that moved beneath it growing tired and ropey.

What happened to him?

Got too big, love. Friendly and dopey as a labrador, but he had to go. Sent to live in a zoo up north.

As for whatever got Belle—that other something, sneaking into backyards for a taste of cat or chicken, fed up with marsupials and disease-ridden wild rabbits—Mum said she'd have it for a throw rug before she let it have her angoras. She protected them from meeting



the same grisly end as Belle, hauling the hutch up to where she could keep an eye on it at all times. Sometimes patrolling the fence at the back of the property of an evening, beyond which all was paddocks and dense banks of blackberries and whatever they might shelter.

Your bike muscles aren't up to much yet, so you stand for the dusty rises in the road and march on the pedals, the sun slung across your bare shoulders, warm as Reef oil. And although your lungs are on fire and the corners of your eyes are filling with grit, that tight place in your chest is cracking open, the bright afternoon spilling in. The new year will be better. It will be. It will. There's a song on a tape someone made for your sister, and it's playing over and over, behind your eyes. Even when it gets so steep that you have to jump off and push, the song is still there; about a wide open road, and how you can go any place you want to.

The road levels out where the new estate is going up. It's good, some days, to walk around there, to climb onto the skeletons of roofs or to wander around all those rooms where nothing has happened yet. The Howards are building up there, a bigger place. A pool room and two bathrooms and bedrooms forever. That's where Karlee tested your nerve.

She's off limits now. Mum had spotted the little sequence of scabby crescent-moons, near the inside of your elbow, as though a strange creature with strange teeth had bit there.

Who did that to you? she demanded. Why on earth did you let her? Disfigure you like that.

You hadn't cried out or anything, had stood perfectly still in the room that Karlee said would soon be her bedroom. Felt her breath puff on your cheek as she watched your face for a hint of flinch. Nothing. She dug harder and then too far. It had felt like winning, watching her jerk her arm back and scrape under her fingernails. But then she said, Now try me, holding her arm out, and you quit. You had nerve, but only one kind of nerve.