



## Exploring A Hidden Forest

Haydn Washington interviews Jeannie Baker

Now, 'Hidden Forest', yet another book about a forest but this time its one under the surface of the waves ... a kelp forest ... What's so special about kelp?

Most people think of kelp as they see it washed up on the seashore.. and they think of it as slimy and smelly and they might get their boats tangled up in it ... it's a nuisance and they don't think much beyond that. Kelp is regarded as seaweed. There are incredible varieties of seaweed. Some of them are extraordinarily beautiful, strange and colourful and yet they are taken for granted ... they're regarded as weeds. So its trying to show that this is a huge area of complexity, variety and beauty that is worth looking at.

This is a special sort of kelp isn't it? Where is this kelp found?

This kelp is found in various parts of the world. There are forests of it off the coldwater coasts of North and South America, South Africa, South-east Australia and New Zealand.

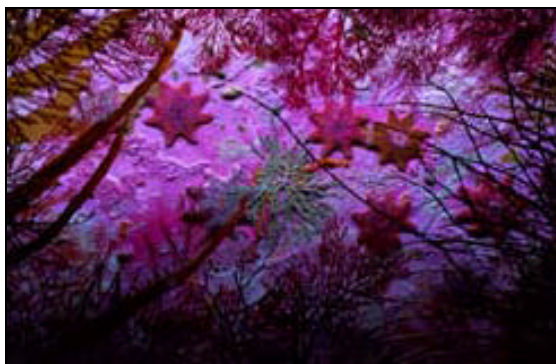
The particular kind of kelp I've based my book around is known as Giant Kelp and it's apparently the fastest growing plant in the world and it grows to huge heights ... it can grow up to 30 metres from the seafloor to the water surface where it continues to grow and hang in sometimes dense canopies along the water surface. When you get large quantities of it, it looks like a forest and it's as complex, multilayered and magical as rainforest on land ... and it nurtures a great variety of other plants and animals.

Is this a forest we're in danger of losing as well?

It's controversial. From talking to some of the local scientists, there do seem to be valid grounds for concern. There hasn't been a lot of study on kelp forest in Australia but Dr Graham Edgar (The University of Tasmania) believes there is now only about 5% of the kelp forest there was here just 30 years ago.

So you actually went and visited the kelp. Tell us something about what it was like to actually be there in a kelp forest.

The first time I saw kelp as a forest was purely by accident, it was one of the first times I ever swam off Tasmania and it just happened to be where there was a kelp forest! This was about 20 years ago and it was such a special experience to me because when you see kelp under the water and you're looking up, the sun is like the light of the sky, it penetrates the surface of the water and it shoots rays down like in a rainforest and the



whole place is very magical and mysterious and there's lots of fish in the kelp ... it really fired my imagination.

You went back there several times didn't you?

Yes I did three trips especially to study the kelp. Sometimes it was winter and very cold. Even in summer it can get fairly cold in the water so it meant being fitted out with a 7mm thick wetsuit, so the cold wasn't a problem.

Were you snorkelling or scuba diving?

Mostly snorkelling because with snorkelling I didn't really have to think about anything except what I was looking at and just get caught up in the wonder of it. But I did spend a bit of time scuba diving. I did a course so that I could sit on the seabed and just watch what was going on around and get close to things there.

So that was the first time you'd ever done scuba diving?

I wouldn't have scuba dived if I hadn't wanted to see the kelp forest close up and understand it better.

I don't want to be trite but is it just another book about another beautiful area of Australia?

Its about lots of things ... it's about our fear of the sea. Mostly we can't see beneath the surface of the sea so it was investigating that fear. When you can't see something, your mind imagines what might be there, especially if it's a dark, mysterious environment. The main character in the story imagines, as a lot of us do, that there are all kinds of things, sharks and octopus ... all kinds of things that are going to come and get him and the kelp itself is something that the boy is fearful of because he worries he is going to get tangled up in it and he thinks of it as being slimy.

Is the book about kelp or is it about the way we see our world?

The kelp is a metaphor for the way we see our world. The mask and snorkel is a kind of key because it opens up this world to Ben and suddenly he can see. The more he sees the more caught up he becomes in the wonder of it. What he most feared I suppose are creatures that might come and get at him ... and there's a point in the story where Ben actually meets up, he has eye contact with a whale, probably the largest creature he could ever encounter in this kind of environment, a creature that at its whim could destroy him and yet they have eye contact and he discovers a very gentle creature.

I notice that's the only image in the book that doesn't have words with it. Is that deliberate?



Yes, because I want the viewer to find their own words, to think of themselves as the character in the story and how they would feel if it happened to them: but also it's a situation it's hard to find words for. It's one of fear ... it's one of wonder.

At the end of the story when Ben gets his fish trap back he lets the fish go and he says this is where they belong ... so what's happened to Ben?

Ben starts off hoping to catch fish, he's frustrated he's only managed to catch tiddlers and maybe he only wants to catch fish anyway to impress his friends with what he's caught. He only manages to catch tiddlers and he lets them die in the sun. He doesn't respect the world beneath the sea, it's a world he doesn't understand, but when he actually starts to see it, the more he sees, the more he is filled with wonder and the more he appreciates it and as with many things I think, what we fear, what we don't understand, we abuse, we maybe destroy. But when we come to care about something, we appreciate it more, we nurture it more and we value it ... so in seeing the wonder of what is in that environment, he starts to value it ... and by the end of the story, he values it enough to realise that these creatures he's caught are part of the wonder of that environment so he wants to put them back.

How would you contrast this with some of your other books that have had quite an obvious environmental theme in terms of Daintree and the rainforest and how it's being encroached upon and destroyed there and your Window looking out on the world and seeing what's happening to it and then to exotic weeds like Rosy Dock spreading over the world. How would you contrast this book in terms of its comment on the environment?

Kelp forest is an environment not many people are aware of, even people living on its doorstep, so it's an environment that often isn't valued. It's part of the sea, which most people don't see because the surface is a barrier to our vision. But more than that it's about the change, the sea change in an individual as they come to appreciate this environment.

As an environmentalist, rather than looking at the specific facts of an environmental problem, this book actually goes further and is looking at the underlying way we look at the world. In many ways it's an underpinning of our environmental problems we have today. I mean the way that we see our world. We can't conserve and protect what we don't see and understand.

Absolutely! What was misunderstood and abused, what was a source of fear, has now become a source of wonder. I just look at myself and how I've changed over the years and a lot of things I did in the past, I wouldn't do now. Because I understand them so much better they would just seem wrong now.

You've got that sense of wonder like Ben?

I feel I do still have a sense of wonder. It's something really special ... But as you learn and understand more, it does change the way you see things,