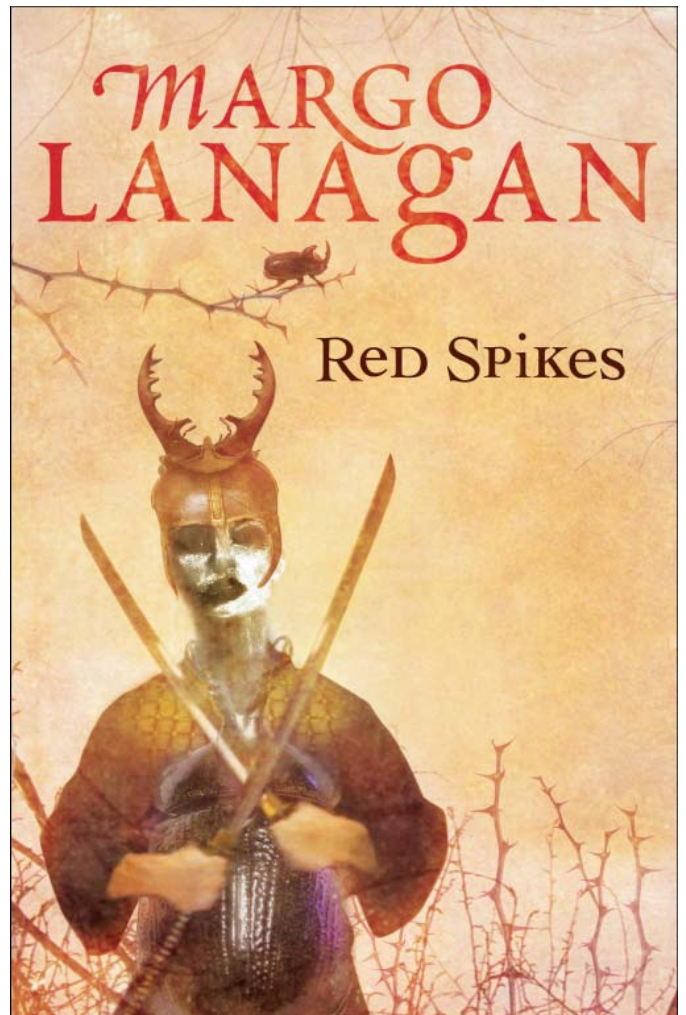


Reading group notes for *Red Spikes*
by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About Margo Lanagan (2) Reviews (2)
On writing *Red Spikes* - Margo Lanagan (2) *Red Spikes* (3) Some suggested points
for discussion (4) Other books by Margo Lanagan (5)
Suggested further reading (5) Interviews (6) The stories in Detail (7)

About Margo Lanagan

Margo Lanagan was born in 1960 and has lived in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Mundrabilla and Paris. She has travelled and studied history and worked in a variety of jobs, including selling encyclopedias, washing forks and writing corporate annual reports. She now works as a contract technical writer and writer of fiction. Her fiction includes:

- ☞ short stories – *Black Juice* and *White Time*
- ☞ novels for teenagers and adults – *The Best Thing* and *Touching Earth Lightly*
- ☞ and for younger readers – *Wildgame*, *The Tankermen* and *Walking Through Albert*.

Black Juice has been recognised in 17 awards internationally. Winner of 2 World Fantasy Awards in 2005 and a Victorian Premier's literary award in 2004, it was also shortlisted for the NSW and the QLD Premier's literary awards

Read Margo's Blog: <http://www.amongamidwhile.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.bwibooks.com/mlanagan2.htm>

What the critics say

Margo Lanagan's earlier stories have been described by many superlatives such as 'transcendent', 'brilliant' and 'unforgettable'. Other critics have said:

The genius (not too strong a word) of ... Margo Lanagan is her ability to reach into darkness and return with something both different and powerfully convincing. It's astonishing enough to be introduced so abruptly to a writer this good, but even more extraordinary is her seemingly effortless mastery of the short story form, and what she proceeds to do with it - Faren Miller, LOCUS, USA.

Margo Lanagan's short stories are like funeral flowers, beautiful and terrible at the same time (they) tell us something about what makes life worth living, even in the darkest times... Margo Lanagan is a dark magician, and potentially dangerous. Enter her fantastic world with care, but do enter it! - Spres Magazine

On writing *Red Spikes*—Margo Lanagan

These stories were written with no particular audience in mind, to see what came up from my depths. What came up was pretty dark—recently I read *Winkie* (a story about a bogeyman) aloud to an audience and it wasn't really until I heard my own voice saying it in public that I realised just how dark and creepy it was.

There's a lot of goddiness and religion in this collection. There's a story about a budgerigar that is part of the God-Who-Admits-Of-Love (*A Feather in the Breast of God*); one about a group of teenagers running errands in Limbo

(*Under Hell, Over Heaven*); one about a girl learning about singing-gods who can be reeled in from the sky (*Forever Upward*). Even the animal story (which is about a change of government in a community of langur monkeys) has religious references. There is one mediaeval-feeling story that has no actual fantasy in it at all (*A Good Heart*), a story about a woman who knows how to make mice, and four stories that involve people moving between worlds in different ways.

There's a lot of mud and soil here, from the rushy landscape of 'Limbo' to the earthen houses in *Winkie* and *Mouse Maker*. In *Daughter of the Clay* the heroine is actually born from a clay bank in Fairyland, and returns there from a New York apartment; in *Forever Upward* the girl follows her mother up a seemingly endless dirt path to Pinnacle Cliff, from which the gods can be caught.

Red Spikes has a high body count, from all the dead monkeys in *Monkey's Paternoster*, to a single body in *A Good Heart*, to the charnel house that is *Winkie*. And of course, all the characters in *Over Hell, Under Heaven* are dead.

It all sounds very grim and gloomy! But there is something beautiful in each story too. *A Good Heart* does show you a good heart coming into being; *Baby Jane* is a beautiful baby, and there is another good-hearted boy in that story, as well as a bear (always attractive) and a warrior queen; there is a wonderful strong mother in *Baby Jane*, another in *Winkie*, others in *Feather* and *Forever Upward*. The central characters, most of them quite young, are all earnest and curious people (or monkeys, or budgerigars) who intend no-one any harm

—in fact several of them are out to actively improve the world. I've enjoyed spending time with them. I've been absorbed in their stories, and I hope readers will be too.

I wrote these stories from drafts that were begun during 2004 and 2005. I spent November and December 2005 redrafting them, but it wasn't until the middle of June that the final selection was arrived at. I usually wrote the first draft in one or two days; the revision was more long-drawn-out. I now rent a Writing Room where I do my work, so that's where these were completed.

Red Spikes

Red Spikes is the third of Margo Lanagan's short story collections, each of which contain ten stories which evoke worlds which are startling in their originality and inventiveness, and yet are immediately real and credible.

Now, in *Red Spikes* Margo Lanagan has created another tour de force in ten stories which traverse time, place, character and genre in a tantalising collection. These are stories which force readers out of their comfort zones; they introduce new ways of looking at religion, culture and family, and they are written in a way which expects the reader to decipher language and setting and characterisation in a totally original and often unsettling manner. See the world through Margo Lanagan's eyes and it will never look quite the same again.

Themes

Many of the stories suggest the theme of parenting – of giving birth, of the demands and responsibilities of parenting, and the pain of separation or maturation. These stories might also suggest a range of the qualities which distinguish human beings as they mature, such as bravery, fealty, kindness, honesty, jealousy and betrayal. Some also play on the inevitable outcome of parenting – the loss involved in protecting and then seeing the children you love move on with their lives.

Margo herself says:

The major themes or essence of these stories? They're about people waking up to the world, to its mysteries and its horrible parts but also to its kindness. They're also about the physical experience of sights, lights, smells, textures, noises and voices of all kinds. They're about life, bright and quick; and death, fast and dark. Can't get more essential than that!

Margo Lanagan's stories are hybrids: not one thing or another, they refuse classification. They are about human nature, the precarious act of living and the dark beauty of dying with dignity. They are frightening and tormenting and yet thrill with the epiphanies we have when life suddenly reveals its grandeur. For such sometimes grim portraits, they are extraordinarily uplifting. They offer astounding insights into worlds just beyond our line of vision – the worlds we conjure up in dreams and which reflect our real lives so devastatingly. As Greg Bear has written they are like 'a memory of the real'.

Some suggested points for discussion:

For an in-depth look at each of the stories in this collection, please turn to the end of this document.

☞ A short story must economise in its exploration of character, setting, plot and theme. The art of the short story writer is to convey meaning with economy and tightness, and with maximum significance given to the resolution or ending of the narrative. Short stories ideally create 'epiphanies' a word coined by James Joyce: moments of revelation – of feeling and insight conveyed via spare and often unprepossessing detail. Surprise and impact are essential features of the form, though the message often creeps up on the reader, even after the reading.

☞ The 'voice' in Lanagan's stories is often expressed in a skilfully created colloquial language which takes us directly into its world. Lanagan makes no concession to lazy readers, thrusting her readers into a scenario with sentences that demand our attention:

As soon as I saw it, I knew. That was my first time, then, but I didn't stop to make sure. Today was the last day we could do anything about it, and the sun was already high. So I ran.

'Oh, Valla and Brava and their lazy bums!'

Because it was their chores and their it's-our-last-day-so-we-don't-care-if-the-pig-starves-it-won't-be-squealing-until-tomorrow that had lowed me getting up to the lookout.'

(Forever Upward)

☞ Real/Unreal is a dichotomy which Lanagan has confessed to finding a constant source for her stories. Everyday life throws up things which shouldn't be real, but are. And ordinary occurrences can tantalise the imagination too. How do monkeys think and communicate? In *Monkey's Paternoster* the use of language is original and suggestive. What is it like to be a bird in a cage? How do human beings look to a bird?

☞ The titles of this and the previous two collections are suggestive and multilayered. What did *Red Spikes* mean to you?

☞ Loss/Rebirth or Renewal is another central theme in each of these stories, albeit often obliquely. Dylan has delivered a baby and been given it to care for; but this entails losing his own childhood and baby Jane losing her mother too; the monkeys must say goodbye to Hannimanni in order to give birth and adapt to a new leader; Arlen Michaels has lost his love to another but when he also loses his ideal of her, he embarks on a new chapter in his life, as well.

☞ Fairy tale and fable often underpin fantasy. These stories for example are peopled by characters such as Wee Willy Winkie and clay people who live in Fairyland.

☞ Humour is another aspect of Lanagan's work, for she often applies a sort of brutal honesty and a black humour to her observations on life. Eg in *Under Hell, Over Heaven* Leah is annoyed by the Miscreant Soul's moanings, 'Well it was entirely up to you, she'd said to him. You can get away with a certain amount, but you can't expect to be forgiven everything.' (p 76)

☞ 'Cross genre' and 'crossover' are words used to describe Lanagan's work, because it might be defined as science fantasy but equally as realism, and because her works are often marketed for teenagers but attract an adult readership too.

Other books by Margo Lanagan include:

Black Juice by Margo Lanagan (Allen & Unwin, 2004)

White Time by Margo Lanagan (Allen & Unwin, 2000)

Suggested further reading:

Adams, Jessica et al, eds. *Girls Night In 4* (Penguin, 2005)

Bird, Carmel, ed. *The Penguin Century of Australian Stories* (Penguin, 2000)

Bradley, James, ed. *Blur: Stories by Young Australians* (Vintage, 1996)

Condon, Matthew & Lawson, Richard, eds. *Smashed: Australian Drinking Stories* (Random, 1996)

Disher, Garry, ed. *Personal Best: Thirty Australian Authors Choose Their Best Stories* (Harper Collins, 1997)
Halligan, Marion & Fitzgibbon, Rosanne, eds. *The Gift of Story: Three Decades of UQP Short Stories* (UQP, 1998)
Hergenhan, Laurie, ed. *The Australian Short Story: An Anthology from the 1890s to the 1990s* (UQP, 1986)
Krauth, Nigel & Sheahan, Robyn, eds. *Paradise to Paranoia: New Queensland Writing* (UQP, 1995)
Moorhouse, Frank *Best Australian Stories* (Black Inc, 2005)
Sussex, Lucy & Buckrich, Judith Raphael, eds. *She's Fantastical!* (Sybylla Feminist Press, 1995)
Atwood, Margaret, *Good Bones* (Bloomsbury, 1992)
Condon, Matthew, *A Night at the Pink Poodle* (Random House, 1995)
Gardam, Jane, *The Sidmouth Letters* (Abacus, 1981)
Keret, Etgar, *The Bus Driver Who Wanted To Be God & other Stories* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2001)
Wheatley, Nadia, *Listening to Mondrian* (Allen & Unwin, 2006)
Winton, Tim, *The Turning* (Pan Macmillan, 2004)

Interviews with Margo can be found at:

Ben Peek (2005). 'Interview with Margo Lanagan.'

<http://www.tabula-rasa.info/Snapshot/MargoLanagan.html>

Trent Walters (2003). 'A Conversation with Margo Lanagan' (August 2003).

<http://www.sfsite.com/09a/ml159.htm>

James Smith (2006) '[Interview with Margo Lanagan re Black Juice].'

<http://www.booktrust.org.uk/welike/readon1.php>

BWI Public Library Specialists 'An Interview with Margo Lanagan.'

The Stories in Detail

Each of these ten stories is set in a locale which seems familiar, and yet is strange as well. Each of them deals with an incident which changes a life in some way; each traverses the boundary between the fantastic and the real events in life which are just as monumental. Each deals with elemental themes such as loss, fear, parental anxiety, and abandonment; each contains symbols and metaphors which are drawn from archetypal literature and which resonate in the reader's mind suggesting a range of possible interpretations; each contains an epiphany; a moment when

everything changes in both the character's and the reader's perspectives. Each is grim and yet hopeful; horrifying and yet uplifting in its respect for the power of love, life and honesty; each is a hymn to a life lived with dignity.

Because these works are so complex they defy explanation and the following should be read only as one possible interpretation. Discussion may reveal a variety of other readings of these multi-faceted tales.

Baby Jane is a story of a birth, but both midwife and mother are quite out of the ordinary. Dylan is being hurried out of his own house by his parents and siblings, because a mysterious group including a newly expectant mother and her two 'attendants' have moved in. But these are very strange visitors pregnant women; no one can remember how they arrived or why they've taken over. The Queen is dressed in body armour, her bald headed attendant speaks through an instrument which translates what he's saying into English, and the bear seems determined to taste everything he sees, including the new baby! Dylan wonders why his mother who's an excellent midwife has left the scene, since 'Anything to do with babies and births, Mum usually took over. She became queenly herself, moving differently, spreading radiant peacefulness all around. She paused the world so the baby could land on it safely.' (p 3) And then he finds himself drawn back to the house and thrown into the uncomfortable role of being a midwife himself. He realises that these people are the figurines he found that afternoon among the rocks by the creek, come to life; and then he's told that he's to be the protector of this baby, since the Queen must go off to fight further battles. The 'jibber jabbers' he feared in the night as a child are real, it seems, and baby Jane would not be safe where her mother is going. Dylan has to put aside childish things now and become responsible: 'She was real. Jibber-jabbers were real too, but they were somewhere else closed off from him now, while this soft harmless baby was here, drawing the pain out of his welted cheek, smoothing the welts flat by contact with her freshness and newness.' (p 15) This story elides the imaginative play of childhood with an eerie fantasy which traverses the ideas of birth, maturation and parental separation with fairy tale in a gloriously hopeful narrative. It would be difficult to find a better description of the pain and the tender joy to be experienced in growing up and becoming a parent, than this.

Monkey's Paternoster depicts a monkey commune in which the leader, Hannimanni, is so sick that his female monkey followers and their progeny sense that the next conflict with invaders will leave him beaten. The 'bachelors' are at their borders and the women and babies are no longer safe under their master's protection. (The title of the story comes from an old idiom 'ape's paternoster' which refers to someone jibbering with fear.) The invasion occurs; rape and mayhem ensue, and then nature restores the balance. This first person account by one of the 'women' is a

parable about the law of the jungle; the survival of the fittest and the role of a woman to make the best of it all. The violence in this description is breathtaking, but the healing and the forgetting that come after is comforting too. This group operates on the strength of being 'one' together. They fall apart when the centre is weak and 'Each was a lone dottie, without help or hero, a tiny sole vulnerable, running across the rocks, bounding up among the carvens, smelly shadows at her tail.' This could be seen as a metaphor for a society or a family, too.

A Good Heart is a story of unrequited love with a tragic twist. Annie Stork was the subject of a poor village boy's hopeful dreams, but she's given her heart to another, and at the beginning of the story he's watching her wedding to a wealthy aristocrat with great sadness. But greater torment is to come when Arlen Michaels follows Annie into the forest and discovers that she has a darker secret, and one which his love for her will make a further burden to be born for the rest of this life. Has love no bounds? How much can a human heart bear?

Winkie again has connotations of fable and fairy tale, and deals with the child's need for a parent, and the parent's love/hate relationship with that need. Ollyn is sent to stay with the Keller family because her Ma is about to be confined and Ollyn's driving her crazy with her neediness. 'Get her off me, said Ma through her teeth. Huvvy had peeled her off claw by claw. Come here you little limpet, you little sticky octopoddle, he laughed as she wailed.' Ollyn can't sleep at the Kellers because there is an extremely tall man looking in the window. So she runs home but finds herself in the streets frightened and threatened by the very man she'd feared. He captures her and takes her into the mound in the marsh where he lives. There she is horrified to find that he has two jars, each containing a giant eyelid. 'Red Spikes' are the ghastly stolen eyelids of babies sewn together by Winkie to use as his own, and also symbolic of the demands made by a child on a mother when those lashes flutter open. He explains his own name: 'Wee Will Winkie. "Wee" because I am so big, you see. "Winkie" because I cannot wink. I cannot wink, or blink, or sleep. I can barely see for my dry eyes and irritations; do you see how red are those eyes?' Ollyn escapes and hides in the marsh and is rescued by her parents who now have their new baby. Ollyn wonders how her mother knew where to find her. 'All my babies,' she said. 'They wake in the night? I wake. I knew it were you in a minute ... There must be a sound you make, your eyelids opening. It carries to my ears.' But later after all the fuss is over, Ma is fed up again, not with Ollyn, but with the new baby. 'Take her, Ollyn, while I finish here. Wrap her tight and walk her up and down. Behind the house, where I can't hear her noise so well.' And the ghastly dream of both kidnapping and abandonment remains, in the back of all their minds, as the story ends with the ominous words 'he looked so frightened of the tiny mewling thing.' Does danger come from the stranger outside, or is the danger within?

A Feather in the Breast of God tells of how Smoko, a dead bird, has returned to his cage on earth as the god-who-admits-of-love's representative from the 'Hereabove'. He has come with a purpose: to help Scarlet, who lives with her Mum and brothers Ethan and Taylor in this house. His mission is to intervene, to whisper a message to Scarlet at a crucial turning point (a 'Defining Moment') in her life. He knows she'll offer little resistance to his intervention for 'she was very much set the other way, to not see things, to not protect herself. She was all biology: get away and mate, her body was telling her. Last thing she wanted was to think sensibly.' The 'might-be's' in a child's life are symbolised by Scarlet as a child-woman who is rescued by this invisible force. The bird has a vision of all the might-be's in Scarlet's future and understands that, though saved for now, she may be in for future trauma - that's what life's about - but he's saved her youth at least. The ending is full of hope and also acceptance of what life will bring to Scarlet, and to each of us.

Hero Vale lies shrouded in the black mist below them as Diammid Anderson, a Grammar boy, and a local peasant boy named Razor are gazing over it, with Anderson peering through an eyeglass hoping for a glimpse of the mysterious giant of Hero Vale. Diammid gets more than he bargained for when he's 'sucked' into the giant's realm and captured by him, after which he returns to his boarding school. Although a burnt wreck physically he's now a hero capable of protecting Rickets and all the juniors from Bully Raglan and his team of cruel Prefects. Rickets' description of the melee in the prefects' room describes an ordinary punch-up amongst a group of boys, which becomes extraordinary in his eyes: he's found in Anderson a hero and protector to look up to and in this moment of epiphany his future is infinitely brighter as a result. 'Rickets would have the memories to hearten him ... of Anderson... crashing to Rickets'; to everyone's rescue in a magnificent explosion of cakes, and plate, and sparks and shattering china'. This eulogy to bravery and strength is a sweet and yet bitter tribute to the necessity to fight for one's beliefs and to resist one's foes, even if it means death.

Under Hell, Over Heaven begins with Barto's arrival in the hereafter, where he's travelling with Leah, Tabatha and King who are escorting a Miscreant Soul to a fate worse than death. This stunning evocation of the world of the Outer is peopled by those who have not made it into either heaven or hell but must follow orders in order to make enough 'brownie points' to gain them entry. They witness the horror of the soul's descent into hell which in this story is depicted in the most ghastly detail. And although they generally lack curiosity, for a short time Leah is plagued by what she's seen; by imagining what it might feel like until she sinks back into the endless present in which she is trapped. This is a powerful, horrifying evocation of the time beyond our earthly lives: 'She tried to think, to search what she thought was her heart. But she was not let see. The Outer's greyness had her; it walled the thought she was reaching for in fog, embedded the feeling in cloud.' Being in limbo may be worse than Hell after all.

Mouse Maker is about a woman named Bet Cransk who is a medicine woman whose powers have upset the villagers. Her mouse plague is the final straw and she is punished brutally by a group of them. Her neighbour Pedder feels guilty that he didn't speak up on her behalf, and then his curiosity about her magic gets the better of him and he decides to brew up a mouse mixture just like he secretly watched Bet do. But what he creates is an abomination which he dispatches quickly out of mercy, but with the private knowledge that he's done this thing; he's made a living creature, even such a spoiled one. 'I must try to forget that I even saw it, forget that I boiled it up out of Bet's bits and bobbles, to forget completely that I can.' The power to create and to kill; to give birth to an ideal child or a flawed one; these ideas are suggested in a haunting story about human power and frailty.

In Forever Upward Currija and her mother Mummarn are called by a sign to take their offerings to the top of Pinnacle Cliff while the sun is still shining, on the last day before the Church is coming to take her brothers Brava and Valla away. The clash between institutional religion and the animism of this village is powerfully represented in this story about people whose beliefs have been disregarded by the pitiless church men. But on this day Currija discovers within herself the power to call up the Gods; to have them do her bidding; to bring back the men and send the church away. This story, which has the resonance of myth or legend, ends with an epiphany which is powerful and life-affirming.

In Daughter of the Clay Cerise overhears her mother's thoughts about her and goes to bed in tears. Even her father's whispering at the door cannot blot out the knowledge that her beautiful mother is ashamed of her. A fairy arrives

in the night and reveals that Cerise is a changeling, a Clay Daughter whose counterpart was swapped with her and now resides in fairy land with Cerise's old name of Shorghch. Cerise falls through the 'slip-through' between the two worlds, meets her swapped twin, and decides to trade places with her again. But ever after there is something human about her; and she knows there is also some clay left in her sister. She recalls a night when her parents kissed her cheek and the imprint of that moment of true feeling remains with her, a memory of what might have been. She can't undo what she's done, but we're left with a sense that she might like to. This melancholy piece is a reflection on parental love and human nature; on the expectations which make us all subject to the tender and brutal demands of those who bring us into the world; to our inheritance.

Lanagan's latest collection is a rich concoction of themes, metaphors, images and symbols. It's an extraordinarily dense compilation of philosophical ideas and meditations on love, parenting, life, hope, loss and death. May she 'bring on' yellow, blue, green, purple, orange, pink or whatever hue her incredible imagination can evoke in further collections. Her readers will be ready for it!