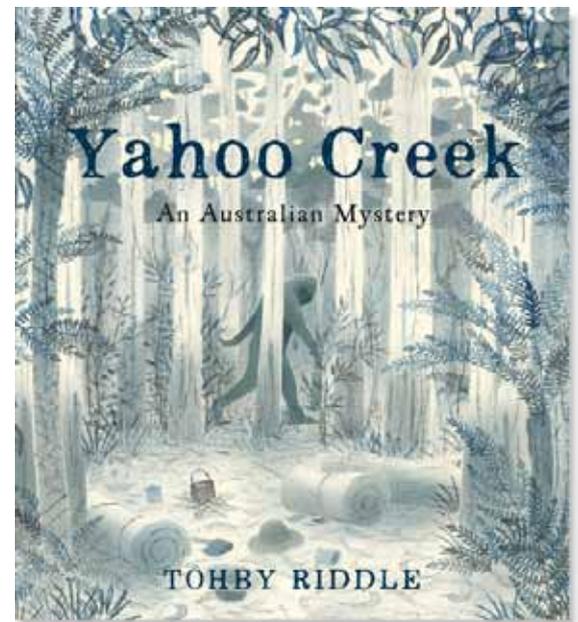


# Notes on the Making of *Yahoo Creek:* *an Australian mystery* by **Tohby Riddle**

*Yahoo Creek: an Australian Mystery* by Tohby Riddle  
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'A book that aims to open up conversations about history, storytelling and truth.'—Books+Publishing

THROUGH CAREFUL DEPLOYMENT of texts, images and points of view, *Yahoo Creek* revisits numerous colonial newspaper reports to look at the puzzling phenomenon of encounters with yahoos (or hairy men), as settlers expanded into increasingly remote and inaccessible terrain. It's a compelling and curious strand of Australian history that, in *Yahoo Creek*, is profoundly illuminated by an Aboriginal perspective, in this case, that of Peter Williams, a Ngiyampaa Elder.

## **The inspiration for *Yahoo Creek***

*Yahoo Creek* came about after I'd moved full-time to Katoomba in the Blue Mountains. Like a passenger-ship on an ocean, Katoomba is surrounded by a 'sea' of forested valleys, hills and gorges, as far as the eye can see. (The Greater Blue Mountains comprises 10,000 square kilometres of national park.) One's sense of the immensity of the surrounding natural landscape is ever-present and, as it attracted more and more of my attention, I sought to find out more about it – its flora and fauna, its history, and its stories and yarns.

A phenomenon, persistent for over a hundred years, was the puzzling reports by Europeans of encounters with the yahoo or hairy man – nowadays usually called the 'yowie'. Reports came from all kinds of people, from the edges of towns and deep in the bushland. The Blue Mountains was apparently a yowie hot spot (*right*)! When I became aware of Aboriginal traditions to do with the hairy man, the plot thickened.

After some further exploration, I felt that there was something meaningful about this strange phenomenon. What was this thing? What was going on here? It raised all kinds of questions about our differing relationships to the land, our colonial and Aboriginal histories, perhaps even our human origins.



Yowie Vessel by Helen Hay of Kanimbla Clay. Inspired handmade objects such as this appeared in Katoomba.

Artwork  
for a show  
in 2013



I began reading whatever literature was available in print and online. I listened to interviews with people who'd claimed to have had encounters, and I talked to people around town who had their own stories. All the while I wondered, was this an actual creature unknown to science? Or a metaphorical figure of the imagination? Or something else again?

Then I happened to read *Kangaroo* by D.H. Lawrence, which featured his utter dread of the Australian bush at night. To me, his literary descriptions of this sounded a lot like hairy man encounters. Here are two examples:

'Now the bush had gone dark and spectral again ... You might still imagine inhuman presences moving among the gum trees.'

'Provoked by the moon, the roused spirit of the bush. He felt it was watching, and waiting. Following with certainty, just behind his back. It might have reached a long black arm and gripped him. But no, it wanted to wait. It was not tired of watching its victim.'



Lost, 1886, by Frederick McCubbin

This added to my ponderings because it seemed to echo the popularised colonial trope of the lost child in the bush; the bush being an alien and forbidding entity that could swallow someone up. The story of the Duff children, lost in the bush for nine days in 1864, had captured the colonial imagination. And art and literature on the theme ensued over the following decades (*right*).

During this same period, encounters with the yahoo/hairy man were being reported in the newspapers. And, for that matter, the Kelly Gang was for some time at large somewhere in that bush, too! In the 1970s, the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* would further explore these colonial responses to the Australian landscape. To Europeans, if not to Aboriginal people, the yahoo/hairy man seemed to embody some perceived quality of the Australian bush.

So, to *Yahoo Creek*. The book started as a wordless story featuring an imagined yahoo/hairy man creature awakening after dusk – as if after a timeless slumber – and roaming the landscape, a wild, mysterious, and powerful figure. Real or some kind of spirit of the bush, it just seemed to mean something to me.



Early concept artwork for *Yahoo Creek*

Research for the artwork involved building up some kind of composite creature based on recurring descriptions in witnesses' stories. I also sought to compile a list of reported behaviours as a source for scenes (see the pages from my notebook, right).

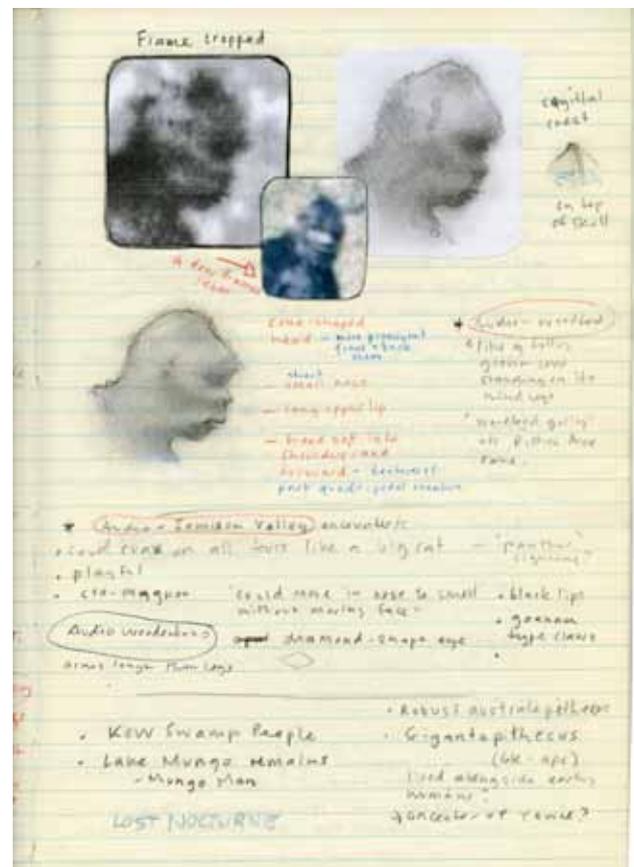
This led me to look for details in old newspaper reports, in the National Library of Australia's digitised newspaper database, part of Trove. I started searching for the earliest reports, those from colonial times. After working out the best search words for these articles – 'yowie' only became a popular term in the 1970s – the most weird and wonderful stories started popping up.

### The text

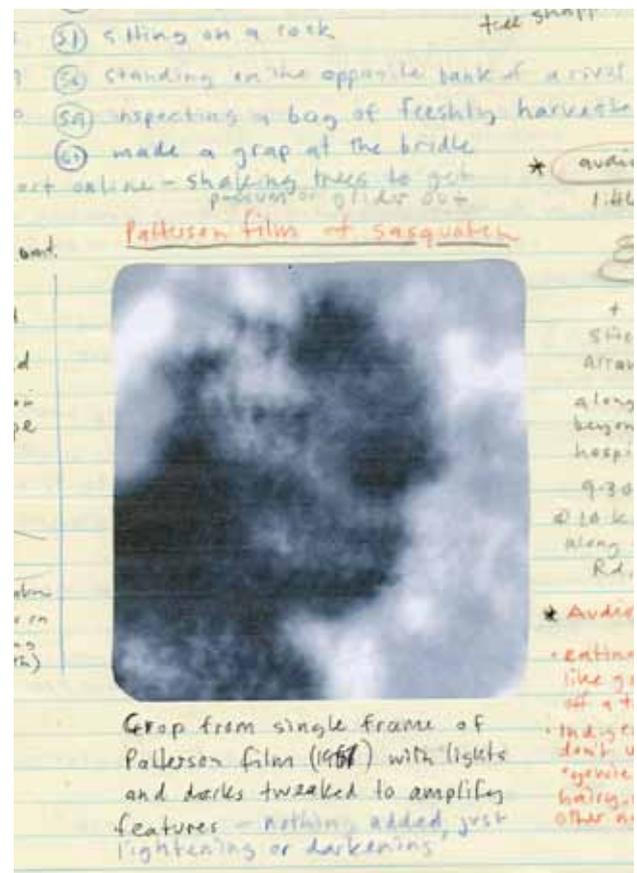
I found I was increasingly drawn to the language and voices of these early reports and the remote and lonely colonial settings. I was also impressed with the sheer number of reports (*Yahoo Creek's* endpapers are a selection). That was when I decided to attempt constructing a text entirely out of selected extracts from these reports.

As things took shape, Erica Wagner, my publisher at Allen & Unwin, wisely suggested I consult a representative from an Aboriginal community about the contents of the book, because of the significance of the hairy man to many Aboriginal peoples.

Serendipitously, I met Peter Williams, a Ngiyampaa Elder from north west NSW. At our first meeting we spoke for two hours, and later, after writing up my notes, I realised that many of the things he told me offered a fascinating matter-of-fact counterpoint to the bewildered colonial reports. I arranged a series of his statements and inserted them into the book's layout at key points to see what would happen. To me, their impact was powerful and profound. I showed Uncle Pete and he liked what was happening too.



The photos and drawings on these notebook pages are based on the famous Patterson–Gimlin footage shot near Oregon, USA, in 1967 (because it seemed the features of the Australian yowie sometimes correlated with the American 'bigfoot'). One frame especially caught my eye. Zooming in on it and enhancing the contrast, revealed a remarkable profile of a creature – whether real or a very sophisticated hoax – quite unfamiliar to me (below).



## The book's title

The title *Yahoo Creek* came from discovering that this unusual place name had been used at least five times along the Great Dividing Range – in Victoria, NSW and Queensland – where the vast majority of reported yahoo encounters were occurring. ('Yahoo' is what many people called the yowie in colonial times.) There were many other 'yahoo' place names used along the range too (*right*). Conversely, I found no place name using 'yahoo' *outside* the Great Dividing Range.



A selection of 'yahoo' place names taken from old newspaper clippings

In toponymy (the study of toponyms or place names), place names are classified according to types. There are 'descriptive names', named after a geographical feature of a place. There are 'commemorative names', named after an important or famous person. And, among others, there are 'incident names', named after something that happened at a place. Was Yahoo Creek an incident name? If so, what 'yahoo' incident might have happened there? Because Yahoo Creek was used multiple times (according to old maps and gazetteers) I saw it as a kind of catch-all place name for the sorts of locations where alleged sightings and encounters had occurred – and a good name for a book, too!

## The artwork

The artwork for the book grew out of ideas and techniques that were already in development (*right*, for example). The effect of the palette and techniques felt right for the mysterious yahoo/hairy man subject matter – and for the atmospheric, bygone-era, colonial settings. They seemed to lend an otherworldly, 'moonlit' quality to things, that deepened the sense of intrigue.

Aside from looking for information that would help me picture the yahoo, I also needed to research locations. References were sourced from my own photos of trees, leaves, rocks and landscapes, taken while out in the bush, or from current or historical photos. Sometimes I was even able to visit sites where alleged sightings took place, such as Treachery Headland, near Seal Rocks – where a party of five claimed to see a hairy man through a telescope sitting, 'crying' on the headland in 1882.



The Yowie, 2014. From the group show *Black and Blue*. Blue Mountains Cultural Centre Collection

Given photography was such a new medium in colonial times, there is a wealth of compelling photos from the time. Some (right) powerfully convey a lonely, haunted quality to settler life in the bush, which aptly captured the colonial ideas and themes emerging in my research for *Yahoo Creek*, and informed illustrations like the one for the ‘settler’s daughter’ story (below).



Artwork for pages 18–19, *Yahoo Creek*. ‘A settler’s daughter having gone for cows ... suddenly stood face to face with the stranger.’

I also revisited Australian painters who were contemporary to many of the colonial yahoo/hairy man reports. Painters like McCubbin were observing the bush closely and capturing something about it. His bush was often the setting for human scenes of loneliness and isolation – lost children, bush sawyers, bush burials and solitary swaggies – all pervaded with a kind of Pre-Raphaelite melancholy. This ‘bush of the imagination’ struck me as the kind of terrain a shadowy hairy man might emerge from – into the colonial consciousness!



*Down on His Luck*, 1889, by Frederick McCubbin



This box contains many of the handmade stamps of leaves, birds and animals used in *Yahoo Creek's* illustrations. The two stamp pads provided the colours.

## The artwork techniques

The Australian bush, especially along the Great Dividing Range, and definitely in the Sydney sandstone region of the Blue Mountains, is rich in biodiversity. Visually, it is complex and often messy – in a scratchy, scribbly kind of way.\*

My approach to this messy complexity was to recreate it with the dense stamping of sticks and leaves and nuts and flowers. I did this by taking lots of photos of the bush and by taking the occasional sample of a banksia leaf or gum leaf back to my attic studio. From these observations I carved stamps out of rubber (*left*) This way I could replicate the bush's flora – with all its repetitions of forms – in a modular way. One or two good leaf stamps could, over time, fill a tree with leaves.



This clear-plastic folder stores the stencils made for *Yahoo Creek's* illustrations. The pocket displayed has the main stencils for the 'settler's daughter' illustration.

Other features of the artwork needed a different treatment. This was dealt with by use of stencils (and sponges to apply the ink). Thus skies, darker areas of mountains or rocks, and the yahoo figure itself could be more flexibly rendered than with a stamp. I also quite liked the idea that the sponged-on ink was rather like a soft haze of dots or particles, befitting the potential apparition-like nature of the sightings – and even hinting at particle theory, which holds that an apparently 'solid' physical form is actually only a group of moving particles behaving in a certain way. To the layperson, at least, a mysterious idea in itself.

\* Note that the bush might not have been this 'messy' before the sophisticated fire regimes of Aboriginal people were disrupted by the arrival of Europeans. On first contact with the landscape, many Europeans were struck by the bush's resemblance to the gentleman's parks of England. This is well documented in *The Greatest Estate on Earth* by Bill Gammage.

## Some final musings ...

### A mystery flight

The process of creating *Yahoo Creek* was like catching a mystery flight. The book started in one place, and ended up where I'd never expected it to end up. It was a fascinating, surprising and sometimes unsettling journey, but always a rich experience – the way making a book should be.

### A long gestation!

*Yahoo Creek* is, in part, a long overdue response and tribute to the Australian landscape. I grew up on the upper reaches of Middle Harbour in Sydney – a child of Sydney's Hawkesbury sandstone bushland – and spent many hours wandering alone in the bush, visiting my favourite rocks and caves, catching frogs in the creeks and cicadas in the trees, and exploring the large, tidal mangrove forest where the main creek ran into the bay. I seemed to have it all to myself. More recently, after moving to the Blue Mountains town of Katoomba, the bush has become a major presence again.

With a background in architecture, my books have usually been set in built environments, usually urban, and often with a New York City metropolis feel – probably from watching too many 1970s Woody Allen films, when I was younger. So, after all this time, *Yahoo Creek* is my first book to be explicitly set in nature and to feature the Australian landscape in all its unique beauty.

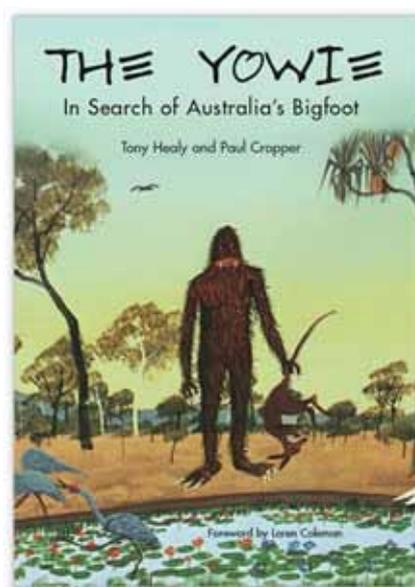
### Is the past as unpredictable as the future?

The historical element of *Yahoo Creek* fascinates me. I've often recalled Robert Forster's 1990 song 'Danger in the Past' and the idea within it that the past is not a fixed, stable thing, but can hold mysteries and secrets that can threaten the stability of one's present reality. That's why it's so interesting to revisit and reconsider Australia's colonial past through the strange lense of yahoo sightings, and further, to add the 180-degree swivel of point of view that Uncle Pete's Aboriginal perspective brings.

On that latter note, I suspect much of Australia's telling of its history still needs to be tempered by the Aboriginal point of view and Aboriginal traditional knowledge. Maybe that way all Australians can be more assured that Australia's foundation myths better correlate with Australia's foundation truths.



Detail from a piece of artwork not used in the final version of *Yahoo Creek*



This excellent book by Paul Cropper and Tony Healy is the most comprehensive on the subject of yowies [Note: the cover uses one of Aboriginal artist Dick Roughsey's incredible 'quinkin' illustrations from *Turramulli the Giant Quinkin*, 1982]

## Activities and further explorations

There is much to explore in *Yahoo Creek*. The book raises all kinds of questions about culture, history, science and more. The following questions and activities might be helpful to teachers and readers.

### Before reading the book ...

Look at the cover. What is the book going to be about?  
Where and when do you think the book is set?

### After reading the book ...

Who wrote the text?

Are newspaper articles fact?

Is eyewitness evidence reliable? Also consider accounts where more than one person was present, and where more than one sense was engaged (e.g. sight, smell, touch, hearing).

Uncle Pete's words aside, what could explain the events in these newspaper reports?

If yowies are real, what could they be?

If yowies are real, why don't scientists have more evidence of their existence?

Is the proposition 'absence of evidence is evidence of absence' a sound one?

Why would the Great Dividing Range be the place where most encounters with yowies, past and present, occur?

What can place names tell us? Explore toponymy, the study of place names.

What does Uncle Pete mean by 'lore'?

Discuss the possible meanings of Uncle Pete's words on page 32, the last page.

### Activities

1. Write a yowie's point of view of an encounter with a European settler or settlers.
2. Write a diary of a yowie. It could be one day, or longer. Consider where it lives and how it lives and what it is thinking and feeling, whether it lives alone, etc.
3. Uncle Pete is a Ngiyampaa man. Find out more about the Ngiyampaa people, their country, language, culture, etc. What is the name of the traditional Aboriginal people of your area? Find out more about them, too.
4. Make a yowie out of modelling clay. Just try to capture the spirit of it!
5. The artwork technique used in *Yahoo Creek* is challenging, there are scalpels and boxcutter blades involved, and some quite fine cutting, and the sponges are dense and carefully shaped. But the principles can be applied. a) Collect up whatever pre-made stamps are around and see what images you can make by repeating the stamps in patterns or shapes, using more or less ink for variety, and masking areas with paper so that only parts of the stamp show up. b) On an A4 piece of paper, draw your own yowie in pencil. Cut it out carefully, so that you have both the cut-out figure and the yowie-shaped hole it left in the paper. Both are stencils. Then with as fine and dense a piece of sponge possible, make yowie figures on another piece of paper either by sponging stamp pad ink into the yowie-shaped hole in the paper, or sponging ink around the cut-out figure so that its shape appears in negative.