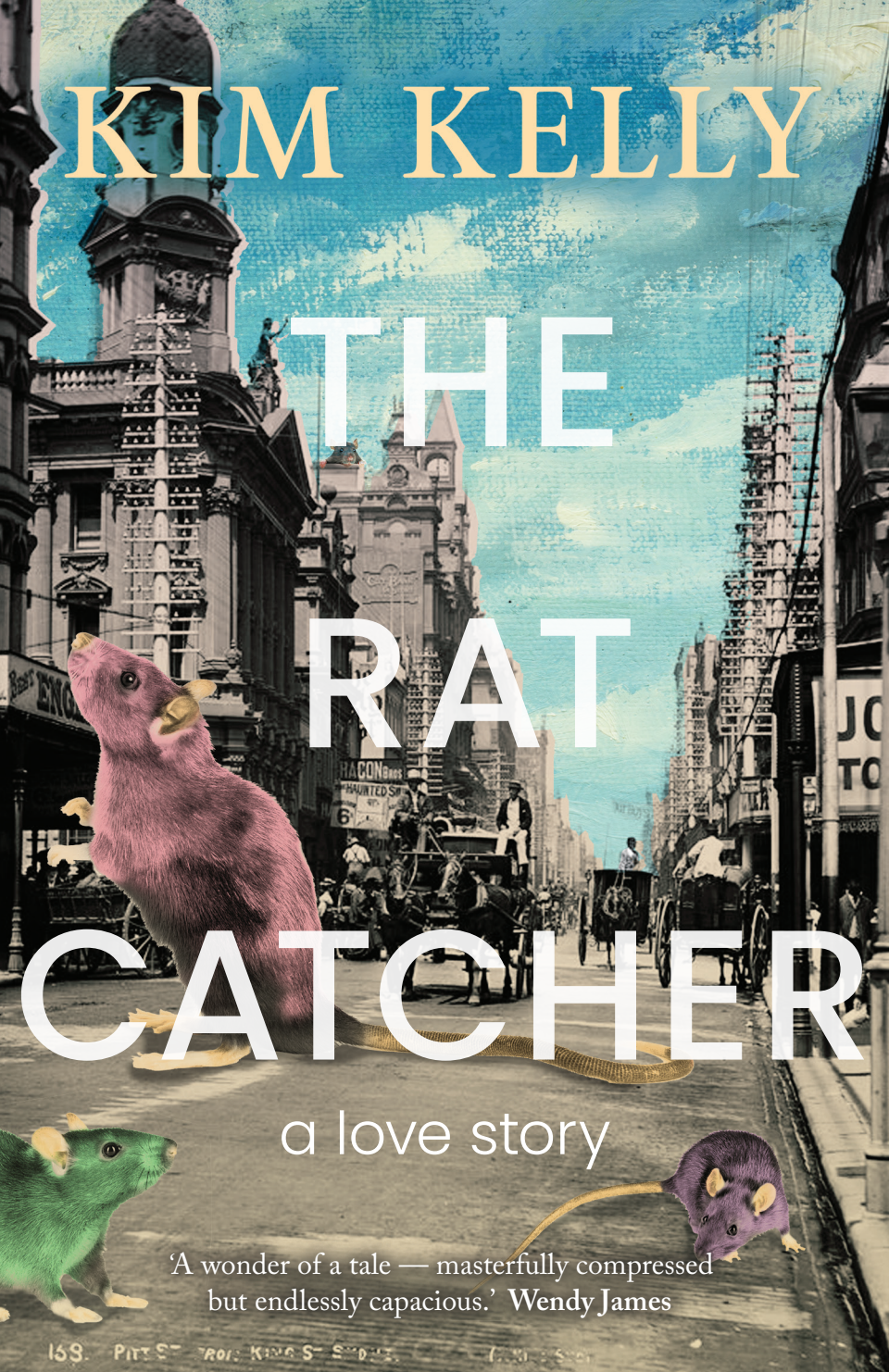
KIM KELLY

THE RAT CATCHER

a love story



'A wonder of a tale — masterfully compressed but endlessly capacious.' **Wendy James**

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a love story

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brio BOOKS

There is no economy in saving a few thousands a year: at the risk of having the city at any time devastated by plague from which the whole country would suffer. Whatever it costs to give reasonable security against that risk must be paid . . . Let the salvation of the people be attended to first, and the question as to which public pocket the price of the work is to be paid for out of can be discussed when there is nothing more important to do.

'The Rat Question', *Daily Telegraph*,
Sydney, April 1901
(when the tabloids had a heart)

Compassion is an undeniable fact of human consciousness, is an essential part of it, and does not depend on assumptions, conceptions, religions, dogmas, myths, training, and education. On the contrary, it is original and immediate, and lies in human nature itself.

Arthur Schopenhauer,
On the Basis of Morality, 1840

When they turned their heads again, Rats was still fishing: but when they looked back for the last time before entering the timber, he was having another row with his swag . . .

Henry Lawson, 'Rats', 1894

SYDNEY, 1900

Never underestimate the ingenuity of an Irishman in love. The inspiration that might fail him almost every other time in his life suddenly comes to the fore when he finds himself in noble pursuit of the girl who has captured his heart. Rosie Hughes might have a slightly different recollection of events, but suffice to say that I, Patrick O'Reilly, surprised even myself with the lengths and breadths of my endeavours.

It is also a perilous misconception to presume that a rat – or any other creature of undesirable habits – is lacking in intelligence or courage by the look of him. If beauty is skin deep, well, naturally so is ugliness – not that I think rats are ugly, and not that I am ugly myself. I am as large and as hairy as the good Lord made me and that will do me well enough. But as for wit and pluck, a rat can outdo any

man, handsome or otherwise, given a fair chance and a fair fight.

And a rat by the name of Old Scratch was almost the outdoing, while at the same time being very much the making, of me. Dubbed so for the Devil who some said could only have made him, it was believed that this enormous, hulking specimen of his ilk came here on a coal ship returning from Hong Kong to Sydney, having made his way south from the icy wastes of Siberia where he was born, gathering bulk and cunning all the way.

Old Scratch travelled directly then from Circular Quay up the Pitt Street sewer to the basement of Moloney's Golden Anchor Hotel at the top of George Street West, as any creature fond of a little conviviality might do, Moloney's being only up the road and stumbling distance from my own abode at the time, a boarding house down Wattle Street in Ultimo.

The first I heard of this rat's arrival in the neighbourhood was in the public bar of that very same hotel. It was a February morning, a Saturday, the summer of 1900, and so hot the streets were steaming and quivering with humidity, the kind of heat that sent ale sizzling down your throat as if the amber liquid bore a life of its own. I was only there

at the Golden Anchor that time of the day because I'd been laid off from my usual work lumping on the Pyrmont wharves. I swear I was only five minutes late in getting to the job – nothing unusual in that for me, and I was in every other respect a most reliable labourer, too. It wasn't my fault that another feller by the name of Patrick O'Reilly had slipped his way into my spot on the gang that day, because all Irishmen are the same, aren't they? The fat ones and the skinny ones, the honest ones and the bastards – and that particular bastard will keep for another time and another story. For this time, I was down on my luck and sorry for myself, feeling homesick for Tralee, and trying to remember that being unemployed in Tralee and unemployed in Sydney are two quite incomparable things, and that I was, all things considered, pretty incredibly lucky, and had been since I arrived here myself nearly seven years before, at the age of seventeen. I was not going to starve to death here in Sydney, for one – or freeze.

There I was, that hot day, sitting by the window of the pub, trying to catch a breath of breeze, as I wondered if I should take myself down to the Balmain Baths for a cooling swim in the harbour, or if I had enough coin for a further drink or maybe

three, when this dray pulls up under that very window where I was sitting, and on the back of it is this great huge tangle of what appeared to be tin clippings, all rolled up in a giant ball, twisted and savage-looking, gleaming and glinting in the sun.

'What's going on here?' I asked Moloney, as three lads start hauling this load of tin clippings in on a stretcher through the pub and towards the basement steps.

'Seems we've got Old Scratch accommodating himself downstairs.' Moloney shook his head with disgust. 'Big bastard rat, and in he waltzes every night, helping himself to whatever he likes – bread, sugar, tea, beer. I've tried everything to catch him but he's smarter and trickier than any other rat I've ever known. He scoffs at any trap I've laid, finds the baits I've made him tasty, and last night, he ate my cat. Believe me, this Old Scratch ain't no rat of ordinary talents. He has chewed his way through solid bricks and plaster to get in here, and when I stoppered up the hole at the bottom of the cellar wall with rusted nails and shards of broken glass, he chewed through all that as well. So, I'm going to give these tin clippings a go, which I got cheap as scrap from the tinned fruit factory down on Harris Street. I'm going to fill every cranny and crevice

down there with them, hoping that'll stop him from getting in again tonight. I've got to do something or next he'll be bringing the plague into this house and that'll be the end of me.'

'Plague?' Every man in the pub turned his head at the word, and not without some reason for alarm. Plague – bubonic plague – had come to Sydney only a couple of weeks before. A feller by the name of Artie Paine had just died from it – a carter from Millers Point, poor man – and his whole family had been rounded up and sent to the quarantine station at North Head. A terrible illness, it is, coming on like the flu, with chills and fever and headaches, and then horrible bruises and bleeding from everywhere and enormous welts and gangrene ensue, before a howling, hideous death. You do not want to catch it. No man of medical science at that time could be one hundred per cent sure what caused it, but rats – plague-infected rats – were present at every such occurrence in humankind, a coincidence which had become too compelling to ignore.

'Settle down, settle down.' Moloney waved away the panic. 'Old Scratch does not have the plague – not yet. I just told you lot, he ate my cat last night. Does that sound like the appetite of a rodent who is ailing? No, I do not think so. What I am most

concerned about is that he'll attract others – others that may be carrying bubonic fleas – and that'll be to the ruin of this establishment.'

This was the most sensible theory of all going around – that fleas spread the disease, jumping from rat to man with an extra nastiness in their nip, so I had read on the bog in the *Daily Telegraph*. An affliction of the destitute, it was presumed, a sickness visited upon the unwashed and uneducated who didn't know how to use brush or broom, but we knew that wasn't exactly true. Mrs Paine kept a beautiful home on Windmill Street, the family was well enough off, with at least one servant girl that we knew of, as Artie was always in work carting beer and wine and liquors of all kinds everywhere, day and night. But even the tidiest and loveliest house can get a sudden infestation of fleas, especially dockside. The tidiest and loveliest man can get an infestation just standing in the wrong spot at the right time too long.

We each started scratching just thinking about it, few of us being overly tidy or lovely, but Moloney clapped his hands for our attention. 'Well, come on, lads,' he said. 'Don't you all idle about there fiddling with your bollocks. Help me line the cellar with these tin clippings – if you like this hotel open, that

is, and not condemned by the Board of Health or Inspector of Public Nuisances.'

So, down we went, half a dozen of us, into the basement gloom, and there, as we shoved the tin clippings all around every seam and join along the edges of the floorboards and up the walls, wherever they would go, Moloney told us what else he knew of the legend of Old Scratch. Word was, so said Moloney, that this Tsar of Rats had scuttled out of Russia on a ship sailing from Vladivostok to Japan. Midways, when it had seemed their stores of salted pork and pickled herring were being got through a bit too quick, the ship's cook cottoned on that they had an unwelcome guest. He laid a basket trap then and caught the culprit straight off – and nearly fell over at the size of the beast. Eighteen inches long was this feller, with a thick, ropey tail of another ten, the biggest rat that anyone had ever seen in their lives, and not a bad-looking sort, with his silken, silvery grey pelt and bright black eyes. And he was that heavy the cook could barely carry the basket up to the deck rail to cast him out.

Old Scratch had seemed to accept his fate with equanimity, preening his whiskers and cleaning his claws, as the cook heaved the basket onto that ship's rail. A crowd had gathered by that time, too, ratings

and deckhands downing tools to witness the creature's demise, and a certain solemnity had overcome them as they watched, for Old Scratch appeared a proud animal, despite his circumstances.

'Out you go and good riddance,' said the cook with far less sentimentality, as he opened the wire door of that basket trap and tipped Old Scratch headlong into the cold and roiling sea.

'Ohhh . . .' The sailors watching this had given out a murmur of sorrow at this turn, and so even did us lads all on our hands and knees fixing tin clippings against this poor feller, Old Scratch.

But oh no, that wasn't the end of this rat, so Moloney told us. As the sailors all kept to the rail, hats on hearts for the creature's certain death, a great big gull began to swoop and dive at the rat, determined to have its own dinner, and there a battle of epic proportions unfolded before their eyes. The gull came in low first, measuring up its opportunity, and then once again with talons poised – only for Old Scratch to snap one of those talons off with his razor-sharp choppers and iron-grip jaws, all as he was treading water for his life in the swashing of the waves. The bird screeched out in pain to all horizons, but came back yet again and doubly determined, swooping once more, and lower, going in with the blade of its

beak. But it had come in too low this time, too close to Old Scratch, who grabbed it instead by the throat and killed it there and then in the water, near instant, with the strength and precision of those king-sized incisors he owned.

Old Scratch did not eat the bird, though, oh no. He'd been feasting for several days on board the ship as it was, so he had no hankering for a feed. He had a far more pressing life-preserving purpose for the corpse of that great gull, so we were told: once the bird was well and truly deceased, this rat of uncanny cleverness hauled himself up on its body to make a little boat from it, one wing for a sail and the other for a rudder, and he steered it all the way to the port of Hakata, on the shores of Kyushu, Japan.*

'He did not.' I laughed, as we kept on at our tin-clippings task. 'You're pulling our leg at that last.'

'I am not.' Moloney sent a laugh back at me. 'It's the truth, O'Reilly. No word of a lie.'

We all had our heads down then, shoving more and more of those tin clippings in everywhere, each of us in silent thought, and me thinking in particular: what a genius of a rat that is, making the best

* All more or less according to the *Wagga Wagga Express*, 6 January 1900. True story.

of a bad lot, making his way with whatever he had at hand. I chewed over his exploits in my mind, not knowing what genius I would soon find in myself, for I hadn't met Rosie Hughes yet.

Rosie Hughes lived in the same terrace row as I did, not that I knew that yet, either. I was busy shambling back around into Wattle Street supposing that I'd go and get my bathers after all for a trip to the baths at Balmain – not only to cool off but to clean out the terrible mess those tin clippings had made of my hands. It turned out I do not have a talent for fitting unwieldy and wobbling bits of metal cuttings into cracks and crevices that were not designed for the purpose, although I can confirm that the cellar at Moloney's Golden Anchor Hotel looked like a chamber of torture once we'd finished the job, with the curly barbs sticking out all over the place. If Old Scratch was to find his way through that lot, it'd have to be in pieces.

Up the stairs to the second floor of number 37 Utopia Terrace I went, up to my room in the boarding house, and I was feeling a bit pleased

with myself that I hadn't given into that second ale, which Moloney had even offered gratis, as a token of appreciation for assistance rendered. I'd promised my mother when I'd left her waving her handkerchief at me and the steamer that would take me away to Cork, and onto Australia, and off to forever, that I would never shame her with drunkenness, theft or greed, or of even so much as thinking of marrying a Protestant girl, and I'd done well so far at avoiding the temptations of all. Instead, I kept myself fit and healthy in body and soul, and wrote to dear Mam once a month to tell her so, and also for the pleasure and pride she took from my fine handwriting, not that she could read it herself – and never mind that this talent of mine had come via the Christian Brothers and much unnecessary violence on their part, which I might recount some other time when I am recovered from those injuries. Suffice to say, though, that literary talent had not got me much in the way of opportunity thus far. It turned out, to my disappointment, that an Irishman and a Catholic of no consequence or no significant social connection would never be given a look in at a decent job, as a clerk or a teacher or anything like that, not in my day, no matter how pretty his handwriting, no matter how far he roamed. My options

for making money and sending any back to my widowed mam, who had only the one son for this purpose, had so far been limited to the docks here in Sydney or other labouring jobs here and there. Not that I was unusual in my plight: as fate would have it, when I arrived in Sydney, the colony was plunged into a great trade depression from which it was only just now beginning to emerge with any vigour. I supposed, too, that the look of me might have played a part in deciding my luck, giving the impression I was not much good for any work other than lumping sacks and pallets and bales off and onto cargo ships. I was always such a big lad, and with big dark eyes like a dopey dog; never anything I could do about that.

Every time I stepped into my little boarding-house room I felt too big for it, clumsy, cumbersome. Even pulling my bathers out of my chest of drawers I'd be thinking, who do these huge things belong to? They were striped dark blue and pale blue, on the horizontal, and I loved those bathers, really, for they were always symbolical of the extraordinary privileges of living in this sunny city on the underside of the earth. Despite my humble circumstances at the time, I could visit the baths where all men were men alike, tall or short,

moustachioed or bald, or well-furred, as I was, none could tell a rich man from a poor man in the water. All that could be noted about a feller was how well he was made, and I was well made not only for swimming, with these overgrown shoulders I had, but for getting about in wet bathers, too, for all to see how well indeed I was made in my most essential manly parts. And happily, in this city, there were none of my seven elder sisters saying, 'For the sake of our Lord and all His suffering, Patrick Joseph O'Reilly, put yourself away,' whenever I was caught at a wash in the tin tub by the hearth. Those sisters of mine were given to all kinds of such affectionate cruelties, especially in telling me that my birth killed our father not with the shock of me being the boy child he'd longed for but the shock of the sight of the little monkey I was – it's no wonder I remain to this day occasionally sensitive about my appearance, and occasionally vain about it, too. But there again, a little vanity is good for reminding you to look after the one and only body the good Lord thought to give you, isn't it?

Ready with my bathers on under my usual working-day duds, I went back up to George Street West to catch the Balmain tram down through Glebe,

and on the way around The Crescent at Rozelle, I sat there looking out across the bay towards Pyrmont with disdain for the bastard who took my job on the wharves over there, but with some laughter in my heart as well for the fact that I was going for a swim and he was lumping about in this thick, sticky heat. Ha! The laugh was on me when I got to the baths, though, because they wouldn't be open for men's general swimming until one-thirty pm, almost an hour away, for there happened to be a ladies' race carnival on that day. I was just about melting under all my layers of clothing, and chiding myself for not carrying my bathers instead of wearing them under my shirt and vest, when the information I'd received at the gate sunk in: ladies' race carnival? I found a lie with my sixpence for the feller at the gate, telling him, 'Yeah, well, I can't miss my sister's event, can I?' And I couldn't get through the turnstile quick enough.

Now, the Balmain Baths were not in the best of repair in those days, with the boardwalks a bit rickety and the roof having been removed as the whole place awaited refurbishment, but it was for all comers, and the long platform that ran along the back of the pool enclosure was always packed to the gills on a hot summer's day. Since this was a ladies'

race day, though, there were only maybe four or five dozen. Fascinating, isn't it? All those red-blooded, swaggering fellers of Sydney not wanting to be caught in attendance at so girlish a contest, but my vanity never stretched to such self-denial. I could have sat on that roofless platform baking like a jacket potato all day to watch those ladies – in fact, I set myself down in prime position by the starter's gun for the main event of their program.

Five of them, all in snug-fitting racing suits, lined up for the fifty-yard trudgen dash and the race-caller was calling out their names: Miss Ivy Doyle, Miss Doreen Munro, Miss Geraldine O'Shea, Miss Jane Someone-or-other and, nearest to me where I sat on the platform, a girl with unmissably golden hair called Miss Rosie Hughes.

Rosie Hughes . . . Her name seemed to ring out across the sparkling blue harbour, around the Cockatoo Island shipyards and land smack bang in the centre of my heart – and I hadn't even seen her face yet. I saw plenty of the rest of her: strong, shapely arms and legs, standing ready for the gun, that long plait of golden hair down her back, and, like another coincidence too compelling to ignore, the stripes of her smart stockinette suit were just about identical to mine. She must have got hers at

the Grace Brothers department store up on George Street West, too.

Just as I was thinking you'd never see such a display of feminine athleticism as this in Ireland or probably anywhere else on earth, off these ladies went at the gun, diving with grace and serious intent into the water. The Doyle girl was in the lead from the start – and not surprising, as I knew her to be a swimmer of great note – but the O'Shea girl was giving her a good go today. Neck and neck, they were, up the length, until the Munro girl took on a burst and edged them both out for the touch, and while the crowd might have been small, we went berserk with the excitement of it all. Rosie Hughes came dead last by several seconds but as she swam over to congratulate Doreen Munro some new kind of excitement exploded within me. Something about the way Rosie Hughes kissed Doreen Munro on the cheek, such cheerful and wholesome good sportsmanship, had me convinced at that second that here was the girl I would marry – and that was even before I saw her stepping up out of the water.

What I thought of all the most womanly shapes of Rosie Hughes at that moment is nobody's business – and still I hadn't seen her face, not up close.

I almost ran the length of the platform, forgetting myself as I barged and leapt through the little mill of spectators and all their parasols and picnic baskets, with no clue as to what I might say or do once I got to this Miss Rosie Hughes. I just had to find my way near to her, find out who she was.

About ten yards off, as she was wrapping herself in a long white Turkish towel, she turned my way, smiling so that her smile was all I could see of her face, though she wasn't smiling at me, of course. It was a little boy of about three or so years old who was the object of her affections, a little boy who'd seemed to have been in the care of some other young lady friend. Rosie Hughes picked him up then and, carrying him on the crest of her lovely round hip, she walked away towards the dressing sheds, and I imagined I could feel her footsteps along the boardwalk we shared as she disappeared, leaving a faint quiver travelling up through the soles of my boots and into my blood.

Delighted squeals of young kiddies, both boys and girls, erupted all around as they had their little races next and then enjoyed a brief novelty event where a little skiff fancied up as a pirate ship rowed out to pluck them out of the water and make them walk a plank back into it. Their fun was all great

fun to watch, and watch I might but Rosie Hughes made no reappearance.

At the stroke of half-past one, the baths were abruptly cleared of all loveliness, resuming their most usual condition of men's general swimming. The platform was soon packed with us men, all stripping off suits and socks and saying g'day and how're yer going, but a loneliness suddenly struck me as I slipped into the water, and my hands, cut up as they were from Moloney's tin clippings, stung something dreadful in the brine as I swam.

And I swam my usual fifty laps, up and back, up and back, in my usual own-paced way, all the while wondering whether I might ever see Rosie Hughes again and why she seemed to have struck me so.

I wondered about her all the way home to Ultimo on the tram. I wondered about her as I ambled back to Wattle Street – where the highest heat of the afternoon had my thoughts turning more towards the rotting-cabbage stink from all our garbage boxes sitting as yet uncollected either side of the open stormwater sewer that ran behind the tenements. The smell, wafting ever more pungently as I neared my own terrace row, made me wonder about Old Scratch then, and if he'd yet ventured here down the sewers from George Street

West. I wondered what the local rats might make of this interloping Russian Tsar; and I wondered if this place would ever really feel like home to me, or if I would move on like a rat myself one day, maybe ending up in India or Patagonia or Peru, or maybe only traipsing back to Tralee, if I could ever scrape the fare. Such a beautiful place, Tralee, the hills of County Kerry so green and the town so quaint and clean, all the tourists that came from the United States of America hardly noticed the beggars dying of hunger in the street. When I was born in that perennially impoverished potato field on the other side of the world, this place here in Ultimo had been a bog itself, so I'd been told in several accounts of the locals, a bog that had got infested with such filth from the city's main abattoir, the council had had to fill it in to tamp down all the unsanitary vapours; they put a park on it then, Wentworth Park, and afterwards the figs that were planted here grew at an unnaturally rapid rate. I was riddling over exactly this, over how such marvellous trees could grow from such terrible muck, how good things sometimes come of bad and bad things of good, and how filthy, ugly Irishmen amble along pipe-dreaming ways to make something of themselves from nothing,

when I happened to look up at Utopia Terrace, as I was crossing the road.

It was then that I saw her, Rosie Hughes, standing outside number 41, with the last of the afternoon sun bright in her golden hair, and a basket of pink apples in her hand. She was talking to my neighbour who lived there, Annie Kildare, a widow with four young sons who was always doing it tough, and especially so as she paid the dearer rent of the bottom storey rooms – for which the other tenants in this house were grateful, because no one wants four little boys living above them, do they? As I walked by the two women now, they turned their heads, and as Annie Kildare said, 'Afternoon, Pat,' Rosie Hughes looked right at me and smiled. 'Hello.'

And, raising my cap by rote, I heard my mouth say, 'Hello, good afternoon,' as rest of me said, 'Jesus,' before I skedaddled away, shooting through my door and up the stairs.

I would not have known if Miss Rosie Hughes was a beautiful girl; I would not have known if she was plain. She was a girl handing a basket of apples to a poor woman and I would never be the same man again.

ALSO BY KIM KELLY

Black Diamonds
This Red Earth
The Blue Mile
Paper Daisies
Jewel Sea
Lady Bird & The Fox
Sunshine
Walking
Her Last Words
The Truth & Addy Loest

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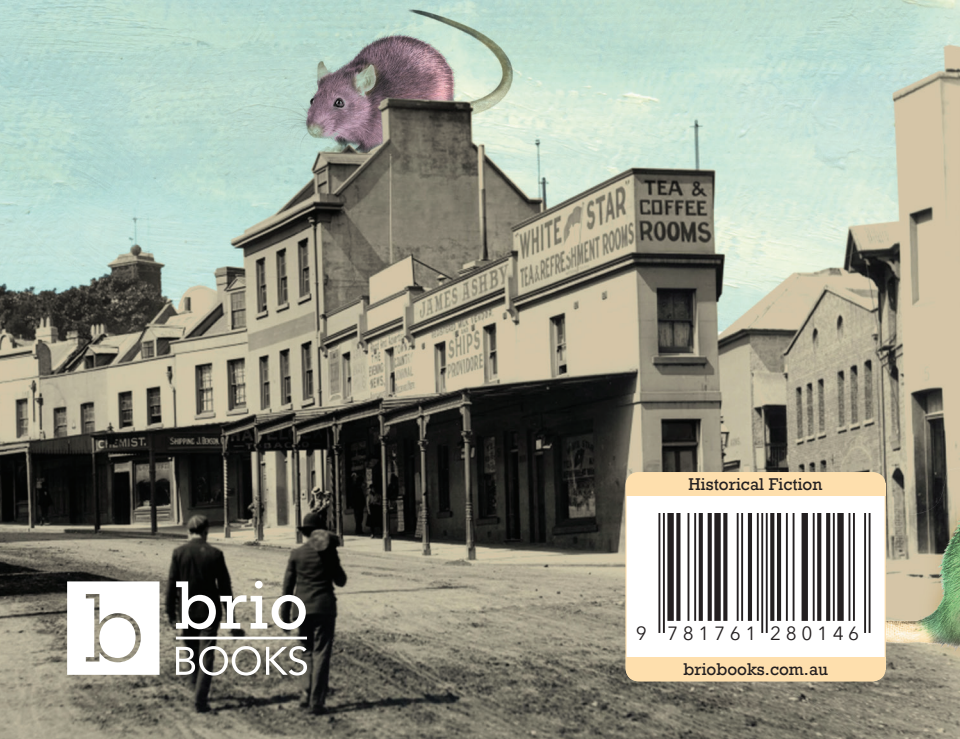
In the sweltering summer of 1900, young wharf labourer Patrick O'Reilly is down on his luck in the slums of Sydney and homesick for Tralee. When a deadly outbreak of plague descends on the city, O'Reilly's daydreaming mind is miles away – in the golden hair and kindly, confident air of a girl called Rosie Hughes.

Just as he's wondering why any girl would want a no-hoper like him, opportunity knocks with the offer of a job as a rat catcher working for the city's Plague Department, containing the spread of disease. But the job will bring him a lot more than a pay rise and a swift education on traps and poisons.

In the Public Lending Library, on the top floor of the Queen Victoria Building, above the bustling centre of Sydney, he comes face-to-face with a legendary rat called Old Scratch who will change the way he understands himself and the world forever.

Drawn from Kim Kelly's own trove of Irish-Australian family lore, *The Rat Catcher* is a mischievous, fast-paced fable told with her trademark compassion, a sharp eye on the epic in the ordinary, and an irrepressible love for life, in all its marvellous forms.



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