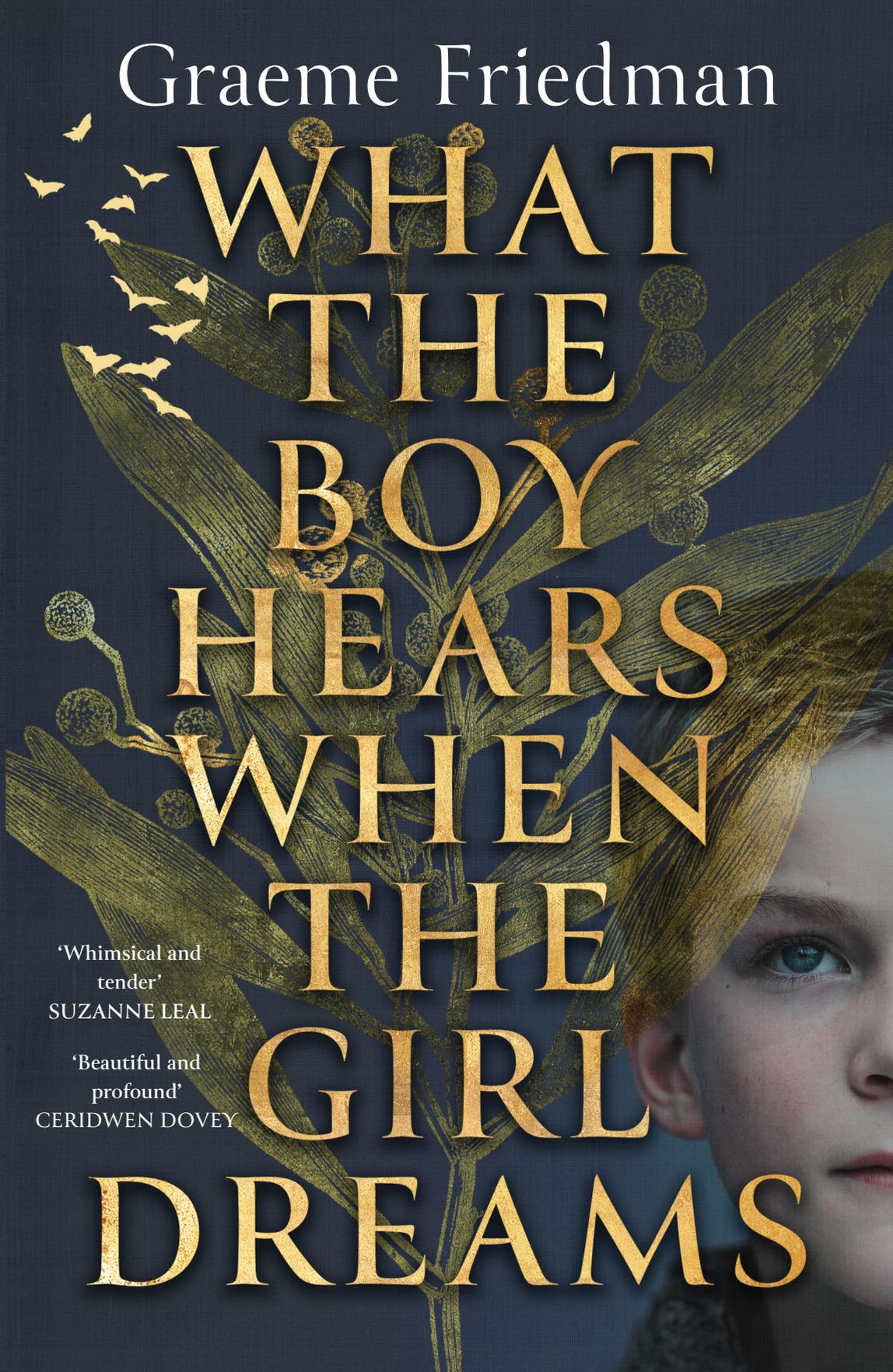


Graeme Friedman

WHAT
THE
BOY
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'Whimsical and
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WHAT
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BOY
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 booktopia
book club

PART ONE
FAMILY

God's foot

Blink.

The first thing Finn does every morning. Blinks himself awake. Then he hears the world. Garbo truck's mechanical arm tossing bins. TV wishing a good morning. Dog barking. His father yelling *get up mate*.

But today it's something else. There's a scratching sound. Weird. Not the usual morning hello. Finn's blinking himself awake and the scratching is just *there*. He bolts upright, scans the room. The vertical blinds are doing their thing, throwing prison bars of sunlight across his bed. And there's the scratching, like those slits of light aren't prison bars anymore, they're guitar strings and some strung-out stoner's abusing them.

He closes his eyes, trying to zero in on the scratching, tease

it out from the rest of the morning mess and the overhead drone of the first planes of the day. And the dog. And the garbo playing basketball with the bins. No scratching. No stressed-out guitar player. Finn blinks, and blinks again, and there is a scratch, and another scratch. *Hhwaai!* The stoner's back and he's bashed Bruce Springsteen's head in.

Finn's eyes are open discs. Could be there's a possum under his bed. He peers over the edge of the mattress, bracing for a quick withdrawal. No good frightening it. Or getting his nose bitten.

His fringe flops forward, another barrier to piercing the gloomy netherworld beneath the bed. Torn Discworld poster. History assignment from first term – so that's what happened to the friggin' thing. Dust balls. Yellow Maroubra United socks from the last game of the season, the smell of stale sweat and disappointment still lingering. They lie limp like a discarded bandage, a souvenir of the knock he'd picked up scoring the greatest goal of his short career, heading the ball between keeper and post milliseconds before the lumbering defender sent him crashing into the upright. Didn't help though. Queens Park equalised, then took it in the last minute.

No possum under the bed. Could be in the roof.

The boy blinks in rapid succession. *Hhwaai! Hhwaai! Hhwaai!* Every time he blinks he hears scratching. He must be controlling the sound with his eyelids. Paralysed people do that with computers. But there is no computer, so how can he control sound? Has he become God? That might be fun. For one thing, he could improve his penalty kick. He has a seriously dodgy penalty kick. Maradona had the hand of God, maybe he could have God's foot. He flops back onto the pillow and experiments again. There's no doubt. He blinks one eyelid, then the other. There is a

variation to the sound. The left eye sounds louder than the right. A lot louder. That *is* weird. *He can hear himself blink.* He can't recall being able to do this before. He's never even thought about his eyelids. They're just there, hanging around his eyes. Do other people hear themselves blink?

This is a mystery. Finn loves mysteries. Playing detective has been his favourite pastime, although he is now too old for childish games. Still, this mystery is one worth solving, one worthy of a Chief Inspector. He jumps out of bed, rummages in his schoolbag and pulls out a notepad and pencil. He begins:

Sounds I can hear

1. Dad snoring LOUDLY.
2. Mad barking. Not Dad, one of the neighbourhood dogs.
3. TV on. Sponge Bob.
4. Music. Midnight Oil trying to drown out Sponge Bob.
5. Shower. Mum cos Dad is still snoring LOUDLY.
6. Someone calling out. Weird cry. Like an ALIEN. Coming from downstairs. The granny flat? ET's in the granny flat?

This last item confuses him since the previous homestay student left a few weeks ago and a new one has yet to arrive. Barring a lost Martian, there shouldn't be anyone in the house other than his parents and him. Or maybe he's hearing the frantic screech of seagulls. He tosses the pad and pencil aside. *Whump!* They land on the bedding with the impact of a missile crashing into the side of a sand dune.

He gets up and makes his way along the passage, his bare feet slapping on the floor tiles, the material of his pyjama pants sandpapering leg against leg. He stops in front of the door to the

stairs that lead to the granny flat, unrestricted territory for him and his mates when there's no one lodging but death penalty-worthy when there is. The door is closed but there shouldn't be anyone here. He presses his left ear to the door, and just as quickly withdraws it. He has another go. Yeah, he'd heard right the first time. There's a bloody river on the other side. He pulls back. The granny flat is flooding!

Mum! he calls out. Mum!

But she's still in the shower. He can hear that water too.

He opens the door gingerly. The staircase is in semi-darkness. He steps onto the first stair, expecting to touch something cold and wet but there's only dry air and the sound of flowing water has gone. He guides himself along the handrail, the stairs creaking loudly. His eyes have not adjusted to the gloom and he can't make them out but he knows – he brings friends down here to show them – that on the wall are pictures of his great-grandfather, Jim Townsend, on his 350cc Indian.

For a few years after his father told him stories about Jim Townsend riding his Indian at the Olympia Speedway, Finn pictured his great-grandfather on the back of a brown-skinned man dressed in cricket whites, trotting to victory in a human horse race. It was only after the death of his grandfather – Jim's son – and the discovery of the photographs in an old trunk under these very stairs, that Finn understood his mistake. Indian is the name of an American motorcycle manufacturing company.

At the bottom of the stairs he stops outside the door to the granny flat. The door is ajar and light escapes into the interior stairwell. His eyes have begun to adjust. To the right of the doorframe he can make out the grainy photograph of Jim Townsend standing alongside his motorcycle, cradling his helmet

against his chest. His racing overalls and face, and the Indian, are free of dirt and grease. The boy has read the shadows on Jim's face as pre-race tension. Behind his great-grandfather is the impossibly steep curve of the Olympia Speedway, for good reason known to followers and racers as the Killer Track.

It is not only light that escapes through the crack in the door. There is the voice again. An urgent, insistent wail, nothing like Finn has ever heard. It could be a woman who is giving birth to a monster. Or a child stranded a million miles from home, knowing she'll never see her kind again. There's no doubt the cry that now enters him like a sword through his temple is the one he heard when he was lying in his bed. The hurt alien voice. He has found the source.

A palm cupped protectively to his left ear, he edges through the opening, picking out the familiar shape of wardrobe, bedside table, lamp, bed, dot-painting above the bed. There is someone sleeping in the bed, the doona moulded in a human form. Now the boy sees what Sound Number 6 is: it is the sound of a black girl dreaming.

The girl in the bed stirs and opens her eyes. She is very dark but she does not look like an Aboriginal person. She looks more like Abioye, Finn's Maroubra United teammate, who is from Nigeria.

Sorry, he says, and starts to back out of the room.

She blinks, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. He can't hear *her* eyelids.

Good morning, she says.

There is something about the lazy way she greets him that makes him stay, her voice so changed he looks to see if someone else is in the room, the alien who was calling out.

She pulls the bedding up to her neck so that it looks like he is talking to a head. A very dark head with hair braided like Rio Ferdinand, the Man U centre-back.

My name is Buseje, she says. She has a smile that lights up her face.

He tries to pronounce it but the word-sound is unfamiliar and he places the emphasis on the wrong syllable.

Busi-jee.

No, she laughs sleepily. Boo-seh-jeh.

Boo-seh-jeh, he repeats.

That's right. But everyone calls me Busi.

Boo-see, he says, rolling the syllables off his tongue. Boo-see.

Good, she says. And what is your name?

Finn Townsend.

She laughs. Fin, like a fish?

Yes, but you spell it F-i-n-n. How do you spell Busi?

B-u-s-i, she says.

He thinks for a minute, picturing the letters.

But you say it Boo-see, he pronounces correctly, even though it is spelled like a bus?

Yes, she laughs again, we are a fish and a bus! We can eat and we can travel. We do not need anything else.

And her laughter climbs inside his ear.

A fish and a bus, he repeats before asking, Are you the new homestay student?

Homestay? she asks, confused. I stay in your home, yes. For short.

Are you studying English?

She looks puzzled again.

No, I am not studying. But one day I would like to study. I

would like to be a nurse.

He wonders if she might know Abioye, but he remembers Abioye telling him that Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa. It has many millions of people, seven times the number in Australia.

Are you from Nigeria? he asks.

Nigeria? She laughs again. She seems barely to have stopped laughing since he woke her up. She should give lessons on how to wake up in the morning. Finn's dad could learn big time.

When her laughter subsides, she asks, Why do you say Nigeria?

You kinda look like one of my teammates. He's from Nigeria.

No, I am from Malawi.

Oh. He looks around the room, as if this may enlighten him. Is that close to Nigeria?

No, not very close. To get to Nigeria you must travel to the north-west, from one side of Africa to the other, and you must be careful you do not get eaten by lion!

She is making a joke but Finn does not laugh.

He frowns, and says, I have read that people get eaten by lions in Africa.

You are too skinny for the lion! she says. Even the lion who has a taste for human flesh will eat a whole village and walk past you.

Her smile is big enough to swallow a lion.

There are not so many lions left, she says. You must rather look out for a very small animal who kills many more people than the lion.

The mosquito! he says triumphantly.

Yes, she smiles. You are a very clever boy. How old are you?

Twelve, he says. But I'll be thirteen in eighty-three days, in January.

Eighty-three days! she repeats. You are looking forward to your birthday! She reaches over to look at a wristwatch on the bedside table. And now I must get up and go to work, she says. It is good to meet you, Finn.

Her laughter tinkles like fine bits of falling glass and this time, for no reason he can see, he laughs along, his own sounding more like hail dropping on a tin roof.

The mystery of his noisy eyelids

He has braved a flood and solved the mystery of Sound Number 6 but the mystery of his noisy eyelids remains.

Mum, he asks, can you hear your eyelids blink?

He is spooning cornflakes into his mouth, the crunch of the cereal competing for attention with the hiss of steam from the coffee machine his mother is operating. Claire removes the milk jug and wipes the steam nozzle, her blonde ponytail swishing about. She considers him as if the question is about cancer or girls, stops what she is doing, tilts her head and flutters her eyelids. She is wearing mascara and blue eye shadow, and the makeup accentuates her exaggerated blinking.

Mum, he says, drawing out the word as if to say, get real, I'm serious.

No, Finn, she says, I can't hear my eyelids blink. Can you?

I can today.

Hmmm.

She pours the milk into her mug and inhales the aroma, the heaped froth coming dangerously close to swallowing the tip of her nose. Her eyes are closed. The ritual has smoothed out the small furrows between her brows, the delicate spray of wrinkles around the corners of her eyes.

Ahhh, she says in a honeyed voice, the scent of a new day ...

And he dutifully completes her mantra: ... heaven-sent.

She opens her eyes, her lips creasing in a faraway smile.

I'm not at the hospital today, she says. Do you have anything after school?

No. Why didn't you tell me we have a new homestay student?

Didn't know she was coming until last night, love. You've met her, have you?

After I heard my eyelids blink I heard a cry from downstairs so I went to look.

Ah, she says. I hope you didn't wake her. She got in late last night.

Got in from where?

The hospital. I met her at work. She didn't come through the agency like the others.

Is she helping you in theatre?

No, not quite. Well, actually, yes. I was doing post-op and she was mopping the floor.

She wants to be a nurse, he says.

Oh, she told you that?

Yeah. And she's from Malawi. And there aren't a lot of lions left. What did she tell you?

That she'd been kicked out of the place she was staying, had nowhere to sleep. What do you mean you can hear your eyelids blink?

They sound like scratching. I also heard a flood downstairs.

Claire glances worriedly towards the door.

A flood? she exclaims. There's a flood?

No, he says.

She purses her lips at the brim of her mug, blowing air to cool her coffee. There is a sticky sound the instant her flesh touches the porcelain of the mug. She puts the coffee down and meets Finn's gaze.

Then you couldn't have heard one, she says, could you?

The Battle of Coral Sea

At the bus stop some of the boys from his school are mucking about but Finn's mind is elsewhere. He's thinking about his day, maybe the strangest he's ever had. He kept hearing odd sounds. When Harrison Taylor stuck his hand under his armpit and did his stale fart joke, it didn't sound like a fart. More like someone getting smacked across the face, which is what he'd like to do to Harrison. At first Finn thought Harrison had got his physics wrong but then it kept happening. What should have been familiar sounds came to him in unfamiliar ways. When someone spoke, their words were pulled into the forest of background noise so that he had to strain to yank them out, as if he was reading a book with all the speech marks removed. Everything would be normal and then suddenly a crackle or clang would pop out at him. In the middle

of a spelling test Finn's best mate, Peter Nguyen, who sits to his left and finishes most tests in half the time it takes the rest of the class, was shading in a drawing of what looked like a popcorn machine attached to a caterpillar. Finn looked up, sure Miss Jameson was going to hear. The rapid pencil movement sounded like a body being dragged through scrub. But Miss Jameson went about her business at the front of the classroom.

The weirdest thing of all was the fire alarm incident. They were in class working quietly on some maths problems when Finn turned to Peter and said, The fire alarm's gonna go off. He had no idea what sparked that brainwave but a few seconds later the alarm went off and they had to evacuate the school for a fire drill. After that Peter kept looking at him as if he was a tsunami early-warning system and everyone in Sydney was about to have a really bad day.

Now waiting at the bus stop he has the sensation that a flotilla of army tanks is rumbling along Carrington Road but it's only the 353 that pokes its growling head around the corner. The 317 would drop him closer to home but he doesn't mind the walk. He climbs aboard, along with a bunch of other kids who are jostling loudly, paying one another out. Together with the whoosh of the bus's closing doors, the release of the brake and the surge of the engine these sounds make a discordant after-school chorus he hasn't noticed before.

Youse gonna be sorry, one boy is wailing. The others have something belonging to him.

Finn looks out the window. It's beginning to rain. Maybe he should have waited for the 317. The engine of the bus sounds awesome as the driver manoeuvres the urban corridor that is his route. It's as if the giant beast is talking to the road, letting

out a snarl at the narrowness of the roundabout at the corner of Albion and MacPherson, a high-pitched whine as it struggles up Arden Street, and then a thankful sigh on the downhill past the cemetery. It's a revelation to Finn, this newly-acquired acuity. All day he's been like a stunned mullet, each heightened sound taking him by surprise. Was he imagining things, like the flood at home? He blinked once, twice, then set his eyelids fluttering. No sound. Maybe he imagined that too. Maybe nothing was happening at all. Maybe he was losing it. But then something else would grab his attention, a new instance of keenness, and he'd be back to believing.

What sense is to be made of this? He is determined to solve the mystery. He will be the boy inspector on the case. The Curious Case of the Mysteries of Sound. He tries to arrange the evidence as his father has taught him. The stuff at home – starting with the sound of his blink and the new homestay crying out in her sleep – and then the flashes of hyper-receptivity at school: Harrison's weird fart, Peter's loud sketching and the coup de grâce – he has recently learned this phrase – the strange prescience of the fire alarm. And now he's so attuned to the pitch of the bus he might be a mechanic with his head stuck in the engine compartment. There is no question, his young detective's mind tells him, something's afoot, a pattern is emerging. Get the bloodhounds out, Dr Watson.

Now you've gathered your evidence, his father would say, what does it tell you? Finn ponders this. The world could be playing tricks on me? No, he dismisses this outright. His friends might play tricks on him. Certainly Harrison Taylor wouldn't hesitate. But these events involve too many adults and disconnected people for it to be an organised conspiracy. There is only one

other plausible explanation: he is developing super-hearing! It is a revelation of mouth-watering proportions, a skill boundless in its application. He gasps as the thought hits him, and the gasp sounds *really* loud.

The bus trundles down Torrington and burps as the gears change before it takes the corner into Marine Parade. Finn sees the massive swell of the surf and thinks, Connor and his mates will be out there. Maybe they bludged and have been out all day. Finn's love of soccer has kept him from clocking up the kind of hours on a board that would enable him to tackle the big surf. Maroubra in this kind of mood is no place for a grommet.

His mother isn't too keen on him surfing. She's afraid he'll get mixed up with the Bra Boys like Connor has, and if he doesn't screw up his head with drugs he'll end up bashing it against a rock. He's tried to tell her the Bra Boys have been good to Connor, given him a home. Connor's father beat him when he was drunk, which was most of the time. When who was drunk, his mother wanted to know, Connor or his father? His father, said Finn, although the reverse could apply.

The sea is crashing and while on other days sitting inside the bus he might only have seen the pounding ocean as it collided with the land, today, when the doors open to let passengers off at a stop above the north end of the beach, he can hear it loud and close. So this is why the Eora people called the bay Maroubra, place of thunder.

With a purr the bus comes to a halt at the beach and he climbs off. From the bus stop to home is an eight minute walk. The rain has stopped and the sun warms him as he makes his way along Marine Parade. A world of possibility lies before him.

He is twenty metres from the front door when he hears the

familiar signature tune of the BBC World News. It's his father's favourite news channel. Pretty much his only channel, period. As he mounts the step he hears the TV being silenced, followed by hurried footsteps. He opens the front door and Rob is there to greet him.

Just got home myself, says Rob.

Finn knows this is not true, that his father is harbouring a secret. Rob hasn't been at work in weeks. But he plays along.

Have a good day, Dad?

Not bad, says Rob. And yours, mate?

Awesome. I made an awesome discovery.

What's that?

I'm developing super-hearing.

Yeah, that's pretty bloody awesome I'd say. Could use someone like you on the job. Wouldn't need the surveillance gear. Bloody good way of getting past those handbrake surveillance laws.

Finn knows his dad is just humouring him and so he says, No, really, Dad, I mean it. I've been hearing things super-loudly.

Rob leans forward and ruffles Finn's hair. Finn could tell him he'd heard him switch off the TV but instead he says, I heard the fire alarm before it even went off.

That's not super-hearing, his dad says, that's predicting the future. You hungry, want something to eat?

Finn's too excited to eat, searching for the words that will persuade his father he's telling the truth.

And Harrison's fart sounded all funny, he says.

No kidding. Bet it smelled pretty funny too. You want to go to the park and kick a soccer ball around?

Soccer ball? asks Finn, surprised. Soccer is not Rob's sport, Rugby League is. It's not that Rob isn't interested in Finn's football.

He comes to all the matches unless he's on the job. It's just that he seems to consider actually touching a round ball himself to be some sort of blasphemy.

Sure, says Rob.

Finn walks into his bedroom to grab his boots and a ball, listening out for a sound, some evidence to proffer his doubting father. Maybe if he can hear a fire alarm before it goes off, Rob will believe him. But right now, he's not hearing anything especially loudly. Maybe it's over, his very brief period of super-hearing.

Bikes? he asks at the front door.

Nah, says Rob, let's walk. Mine's got a puncture.

They are thirty metres up the road when Finn asks, Dad, when are you gonna come talk to my class?

He doesn't know why he brings this up now. Perhaps it's his way of telling Rob he believes his story about still being on active duty. He understands his father is missing being a policeman, that he enjoyed helping others. Being a hero. He would always be Finn's hero. Maybe if his dad could come and tell the children about it, he would feel that he was doing something, he would be recruiting a future generation of police officers.

Rob takes such a long time to respond that Finn begins to feel nervous. He's asked the wrong question, and now he's going to get a spray.

But finally Rob takes a sip from the water bottle he has brought along and says, Let's see, mate. Not sure I have the time.

Finn is listening out. Any demonstration of his super-hearing will do. Things sound a little clearer but nothing that would overturn his father's scepticism until, passing a house on Lexington Place, he hears a woman cry out, Where's me fuckin' needle? Oi, fuckwit, wot ya done w' me needle?

Finn turns to his father and asks, Hear that?

No, what?

There's a woman wanting to know where her needle is.

Yeah, that'd be a knitting needle, would it?

Dunno. She said, *where's me fuckin' needle*.

They both know it is not a knitting needle. They're on Lexo, a street with housing commission units and a bad rep. But it's not just burnt-out druggies on methadone and teenage mothers and social-welfare recipients that live here. There are workers and students and kids from families scraping by on honest wages.

Rob stops dead in his tracks, turns angrily towards Finn.

Bugger it, mate, he says, shaking the water bottle at Finn, you know you're not to use that sort of language.

Finn knows better than to talk back but he can't help himself.

I'm just quoting that woman, he says.

Rob has started walking again and so if there's more to be heard from the woman, Finn wouldn't know. He's out of earshot. They walk on, their steps falling with heavy thuds that might have been heavy even without Finn's evolving acuity.

It's in this state that they arrive at Coral Sea Park, named for the great World War II battle when the Japs sank a swag of Allied ships but were stopped for the first time in the war. Coral Sea Park is home to Finn's football club, and the only Japanese in sight are on his team. He hasn't been here since the last game three months ago, during the final between Maroubra United Under 13A and their archrivals, Queens Park.

The groundskeepers have removed the goalposts to make way for the cricket pitches, so they walk over to an area of field near the children's playground and use Finn's runners – he has put on his soccer boots – to demarcate goals. Rob takes up a position

between the posts. No words have passed between them since Rob admonished Finn on Lexo but as they start knocking the ball about, the mood shifts. Rob's quick to anger but he's just as quick to let it go. He feeds the ball out to Finn who traps it, drops his shoulder and turns an imaginary defender before side-footing the ball into the far corner. Rob's cemented to the spot. Finn runs to collect the ball, taps it to Rob who throws it for him to chase. Finn's breathing is coming faster now. He's surprised by how quickly he seems to be tiring. It hasn't been that long since he played. He was fit and at the top of his game.

He stands with his hands on his knees. Stupid. Got to keep running. The sway and drift of his head throws his centre of gravity. He can't have lost this much fitness. Surely not. But he trips, sprawls and struggles to his feet.

Okay, mate?

Yeah, good, he says, breathing heavily.

During the season he could have kicked a ball around for three hours and not lost his breath. In that last match against Queens Park he was at his best. Within five minutes, he showed the opposition his left boot by rocketing the ball against the crossbar. Moments later Luca came down the right, chasing a long ball. Anticipating the cross Finn drifted behind the centre-back, a hefty freckle-faced boy who hadn't noticed how much space the Maroubra United striker was finding for himself. Luca beat his man and pelted the ball towards the keeper – Finn wasn't sure whether it was meant as a shot or a cross – but as the ball came floating towards the goal he made a lunge for it, judging its flight to end up short of the near post. The hefty defender, his face tilted towards the looping flight of the ball, back-peddled awkwardly in an attempt to intercept it. Finn went for a header, taking the gap

between upright, hulking defender and goalkeeper, who remained planted on his line.

And that is all he has been able to recall of the incident, although in time his parents filled in the gaps, each from their own perspective. Opposition and home-team supporters gaped with trepidation or excitement not yet cut by concern as the freckle-faced defender lost his balance and stumbled backwards into the airborne boy, knocking Finn off-course a split second after he headed the ball. It was a cracking double-header as first Finn's head connected cleanly with the ball and then with the post, his left ear taking the brunt of the impact. He bounced off the upright and dropped to the ground, motionless.

The loud report accompanying Finn's collision with the goalpost carried over the pitch like the sound of death, throwing his father into action. Rob cleared the spectator rope and sprinted across the field. The defender, having struggled to his feet, looked on, his face crumpling, as adults and players gathered around the fallen boy.

Claire had been chatting to one of the other mums and had her head turned away from the action. It was only her husband's panicked dash onto the field, alongside that of the Maroubra coach, which told her it was Finn who was down. She started towards the huddle around the goalpost, heedless of the hot coffee in her hand. It spilled, burning her. She flung the cup away and ran.

Finn opened his eyes. The worried faces of his father and the coach peered down at him.

Did I score?

He need not have asked. He could tell by the proud, amused shaking of Rob's head that he had planted the ball in the back of

the net.

On your feet, mate.

By the time Claire got to him, Finn was sitting up, holding the left side his head. His teammates were crowding around, patting him on the shoulders. Rob was laughing, a hand outstretched to help Finn to his feet.

Wait, Finn, said his mother. Don't move!

Claire took his hand away from his ear. The blood had rushed to the site of injury but the skin was intact on the ear and surrounding scalp.

How do you feel?

I can play, he said as his father pulled him upright. I'm good.

Some of the other players began to drift back to their positions for the kick-off.

Is your neck sore? She exchanged a glance with the coach. I don't think he should carry on. Did you hear his head hit the post? He could be concussed.

I'm okay, Mum. *Really*. Did you see my goal?

She made him face her. Can you move your head, Finn?

The boy rotated his head wildly. You see? *Perfect*.

How many fingers am I holding up?

Three, Mum, I can count!

Is it sore?

No!

Claire, said Rob huffily, he's okay. Let them get on with the game.

In Rob's day playing *real* football – meaning League or Aussie Rules – you'd only leave the pitch if you'd lost a limb.

The referee's eyebrows were arched, mirroring the impatient curve of his raised hands.

Was he knocked out? the ref wanted to know. If he lost consciousness he can't play on.

No, said Finn. It's just a knock. I'm fine.

The ref looked towards his parents. Claire held Rob's eyes for an instant before turning on her heel. This was no place for a marital blue. Rob winked at Finn. That's my lad, the wink said, that's a Townsend man for you.

They lost the match. In the post-adrenalin subsidence after the game, Finn's head began to ache. Going to Mum would have elicited her disapproval. I *told* you not to play on. Dad gave him half of one of his painkillers and that did the trick but the pain of losing the final lingered into the days that followed.

The Killer Track

At Coral Sea Park, Finn's coming in for the half-volley on a ball Rob has kicked high in the air. He slices his shot and the ball skids far wide of the goal. It feels like he's sliced his head too, like his brain's been cut and he's got to sit down he's so dizzy.

Rob leads him to the shade of a tree where they sit, Finn sipping from the water bottle.

Dad, says Finn after his head calms down, did you ever meet Great-grandad Jim?

Rob chuckles.

Nope. Died long before I was born.

Did your father see him race?

Rob is quiet for a moment.

Yes and no, he says enigmatically.

Finn gives him an expectant look.

What's that mean, yes and no?

He was at the track for Jim's last race, says Rob. But he was a kid still in nappies. So yes, he probably saw his father race but he had no memory of it.

Finn thinks about this for a moment and shudders.

You mean *your* father may have seen *his* father die?

Maybe. Might have been in his mother's arms looking on when Jim bought it over there.

He flicks his head, indicating a spot towards the northeast corner of the park.

Finn stares. Over there?

Yeah, I've told you about it, don't you remember? This is where the Speedway was.

I don't remember. When did you tell me? Was *I* in nappies?

Rob frowns, as if he can't quite figure out whether Finn's being insolent or simply asking.

Hell, he says, giving Finn the benefit of the doubt, I don't remember. Guess I just thought you knew.

Finn can't get over this. All this time he was imagining Great-grandad Jim racing in some faraway place out west, not here in suburban Maroubra. He looks around incredulously. Coral Sea Park is surrounded by houses and blocks of units. It's only about four football fields in size, nowhere near big enough for a speedway.

The track was here? Finn says, checking he's heard right. In the park?

Rob scans from left to right. Two teenagers – Finn recognises them as Year 11s at his school – are crossing the park. They pause for a moment while one leans into the other, cigarette between his

teeth, hands cupped over a lit match his mate is holding for him.

Yep, says Rob. Track was pretty much here. Wasn't a park then. All this – he gestures towards the playing fields and beyond, towards the rows of houses and apartment blocks – as well as the shops down there, Lexo and the rest of the housing commission units, all this is built on the old Maroubra Speedway.

Maroubra Speedway? says Finn. I thought it was called the Olympia Speedway?

This time there's no missing the offended tone in Finn's voice. How can he not have known this? Jim Townsend is his *hero*. Finn's claim to fame. And Jim raced *here*, just up the road from the house?

Rob grunts. Watch your tone, mate.

Sorry Dad, it's just ...

Yeah.

Rob scuffs the back of Finn's head with the palm of his hand. It's a soft touch, not delivered in anger. Rob seems more interested in talking history.

Place was officially the Olympia Speedway, he says. But since it was here in Maroubra, that's what people called it. Here where the fields are, this would have been the inside of the speedway. The track was like a huge concrete bowl running around us, with banks so steep in parts that you couldn't walk up them. And over there was a timing blockhouse. In those days, there were no houses around here, only marsh grass and sand dunes. In the twenties this was the edge of Sydney. Out of town.

Town's end? says Finn

Too right wise guy! Town's end, so not much life out here. Maybe some Aboriginal people living in the bush and the snakes that infested the place. They'd lie out on the track sun baking,

then get cut to smithereens by the cars coming round at 90mph.

The Aboriginal people?

No! Rob laughs. The snakes. By then the whitefellas had pretty much done with cutting down the blackfellas. He laughs again, stops himself, a serious look on his face. But there *were* human deaths here, your great-grandad included. The track was too dangerous, so they shut it down. For years it lay in ruins, the track torn up, taken over by marsh grass and the shifting sand dunes and the blockhouse infested by snakes.

That's why they called it the Killer Track, says Finn.

Yeah, says Rob, but can you imagine what it would've been like? These guys were daredevils, pioneers pushing the edge. This was way before any kind of safety procedures. Their machines were raw, pared-down little devils. Can you imagine the noise they made? And the banking was so steep you had to power down the straight at 80 or 90mph, hold the speed to handle the drag or you'd come short. Could get up to 100mph and over. Cars and bikes. Hah – he pauses for a moment, looking across to where the children's playground now sits – you know Jim raced a 350cc Indian. Bloody powerful little machine for its time, very popular with speedway racers. They'd strip away all non-essentials: light, gears, even the brakes. Jim made one little mistake, just too much throttle for the drag, and instead of holding the corner he went straight up and over. Tickets. Business-class. No more Jim. My old man fatherless and Nan penniless. It happened just about there – he points towards the northeast end of the park and then wide-eyed reaches over to scare Finn – maybe his ghost is hanging around, maybe his ghost is sitting down here, right next to us. Helloooo Grandad!

It's not hard to work out that Rob is joking. But it has got

Finn thinking. If there are ghosts, would he be able to hear them?

Dad, do you think his Indian has a ghost too? What if all speedway riders who die become ghosts and so do their motorbikes, and they have to keep racing round and round and round, even when the track gets torn up and taken over by snakes and then they're still racing round and round years later, after the government builds a housing commission on top of the old track?

He looks over towards Lexington Place.

Rob follows Finn's gaze, shakes his head, amused.

Reckon those people have enough on their plates, he says, without the dead roaring through their living rooms at 100mph.

A note about the author

Graeme Friedman was born in Cape Town and as a young clinical psychologist was involved in the political trials of the South African apartheid era, giving expert evidence on behalf of African National Congress and other freedom fighters.

His writing career began in the nineties with the publication of several short stories and *A Writer in Stone* (David Philip, 1998), a co-edited anthology of poetry and short fiction. *Madiba's Boys* (New Africa Books, 2001), his first full-length work, was honoured with a foreword by Nelson Mandela, and was a *Sunday Times* (UK) Top Ten Bestseller sports book. This was followed by *The Piano War* (David Philip, 2003), a true story of love and survival set against the horrors of World War II, and a novel, *The Fossil Artist* (Jacana, 2010), which was shortlisted for a 2011 Commonwealth Writers Prize and the M-Net Literary Award, and longlisted for the 2011 *Sunday Times* (SA) Fiction Prize.

He shared the lessons learned during his career as a psychotherapist in *It Doesn't Have to Be So Hard: The Secrets to Finding and Keeping Intimacy* (Random House, 2012), co-written with Joanne Fedler. His work has been translated into Danish and

German and taught in educational settings in South Africa and Denmark. For the past twenty years, he has lived in Sydney with his wife and their three children, all of whom share his love of stories.

Author website: www.graemefriedman.com

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The Fossil Artist

NON-FICTION

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The Piano War

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the Secrets to Finding and Keeping Intimacy
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‘Whimsical and tender, *What the Boy Hears When the Girl Dreams* is a beautifully written coming-of-age story. Reminiscent of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, this is a powerful and moving exploration of friendship, trauma, loss and recovery.’

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KATE ROSSMANITH, author of *Small Wrongs*

Twelve-year-old Finn wakes up one day with super-hearing. It gives him ‘dancing eyes’ and fainting spells, makes him the target of the school bully, and opens a window onto his parents’ failing marriage. At night he hears the dream-talk of Buseje, an asylum seeker who lives downstairs in the granny flat.

Finn begins to retrieve the fragmented stories which spill out while Buseje sleeps, helping her untangle the terrible mysteries of her childhood. But as Finn’s superpowers grow, he unwittingly unleashes ghosts from the past.

As the immigration officers close in on Buseje, can Finn do anything to prevent her from being deported?

Set against the political backdrop of the race riots in Sydney in 2005, *What the Boy Hears When the Girl Dreams* is a poignant insight into the silences and injustices that divide us, and the healing power of unlikely friendships.

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