



## Position Doubtful: mapping landscapes and memories

*Kim Mahood*

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## Position Doubtful: mapping landscapes and memories Kim Mahood

'Imagine the document you have before you is not a book but a map. It is well-used, creased, and folded, so that when you open it, no matter how carefully, something tears and a line that is neither latitude nor longitude opens in the hidden geography of the place you are about to enter.'

Since the publication of her prize-winning memoir, 'Craft for a Dry Lake', in 2000, writer and artist Kim Mahood has been returning to the Tanami desert country in far north-western Australia where, as a child, she lived with her family on a remote cattle station. The land is timeless, but much has changed: the station has been handed back to its traditional owners; the mining companies have arrived; and Aboriginal art has flourished.

Comedy and tragedy, familiarity and uncertainty are Mahood's constant companions as she immerses herself in the life of a small community and in groundbreaking mapping projects. What emerges in 'Position Doubtful' is a revelation of the significance of the land to its people — and of the burden of history.

Mahood is an artist of astonishing versatility. She works with words, with paint, with installations, and with performance art. Her writing about her own work and collaborations, and about the work of the desert artists, is profoundly enlightening, making palpable the link between artist and country.

This is a beautiful and intense exploration of friendships, landscape, and homecoming. Written with great energy and humour, Position Doubtful offers a unique portrait of the complexities of black and white relations in contemporary Australia.

## Position Doubtful: mapping landscapes and memories Details

Date : Published August 15th 2016 by Scribe Publications

ISBN : 9781925321685

Author : Kim Mahood

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Genre : Nonfiction, Cultural, Australia, Audiobook, History, Autobiography, Memoir



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## From Reader Review Position Doubtful: mapping landscapes and memories for online ebook

### Samantha Lillie says

'Position doubtful'. Artist and author Kim Mahood first encountered this term from her father's account of a 1962 stock route expedition across the Tanami, following an aeronautical map which bore no knowledge or familiarity with traditional language/place names. The book and visual art series of the same title trace Mahood's childhood connection to these places. Through her annual return journeys over several years, she reconnects with communities, takes on some of the cultural responsibilities granted through the privilege of childhood skin name, and leads the way with a mapping project that inadvertently results in a major groundbreaking, collaborative arts project connected to the Canning Stock Route.

I recommend sticking this book out, especially if at first it doesn't resonate, which in my case it didn't. I found myself being critical towards the author's early observations of communities I had shared affinity with and felt critical of her initial distance, detachment, discomfort and urban 'pretentions' in the dessert, namely because I was reminded of my own awkward experiences and wanted an author to not betray similar weaknesses.

To that end, the book works well as a memoir. As the pages turn, Mahood gradually transitions from returned outsider looking-in to being a bit more of an involved participant in the narrative. It's possible that her work as an artist, sans personal family obligations, adds to her detachment and her awareness of it. True enjoyment starts once Mahood dispenses with self-concerns and immerses herself in country, in reconciling black and white history through her mapping project and her ultimately larger contribution to the Canning Stock Route project - an immense logistical undertaking that became one of the National Museum of Australia's most successful exhibitions, *Yirwarra Kuju, Canning Stock Route*.

She shares intimate connection and familiarity of the Tanami, namely her association with Mongrel/Tanami Downs and the Wirrimanu (Balgo), Billiluna and Milan communities. Her interactions and responses to daily life in community are relatable to those who find themselves immersed in community.

The author avoids claiming historical, scholarly and cultural authority in this book, despite the length of time spent in these communities over a period of several years, additional to her childhood association and adopted skin name. By focussing on this book as a memoir, Mahood explores her personal connections, the loss of those close to her and her place on country as a single, white woman with family and pastoral connections to country, whilst reconciling between her artistic, spiritual and intellectual worlds, aware at all times of her limitations.

Connected, but separate, Mahood's contribution to community and to Australian literature through this book and other works is honest, thoughtful, personal and refreshing. It offers a good introductory insight into a lesser known part of country. The short bibliography lists well recommended reads.

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### Alan Marr says

I chose this book because Tim Winton said it was good....and it is more than good. Kim Mahood relates two decades of journeys with the people of remote indigenous communities. She worked beside them to develop "maps" of their stories. It is written with honesty and integrity. The only drawback was the poor reproductions of the art work in the paperback version that I read. Google Images helped immensely.

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## **Sue says**

Kim Mahood's memoir *Position doubtful* is a such a stimulating read. That might sound weird for a book whose subtitle is *Mapping, landscapes and memories*, but the thing is that it hits the spot in so many ways that are central to the issues confronting Australians right now. In other words, it's about our relationship to place. Specifically, it's about how *kartiya*\* (non-indigenous Australians) comprehend our love for place, how we reconcile that *vis-à-vis* that of indigenous Australians, and how we go about respecting each other's relationship. Mahood may not explicitly generalise it like this, as for her it's a personal journey – one exploring her experience of place and her reckoning of that with the indigenous owners – but I believe we can extrapolate her thinking to encompass something more universally Australian. For my full review please check my blog <https://whisperinggums.com/2017/06/30...>

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## **Alison says**

Couldn't finish this book, despite almost universal approval and accolades,

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## **Tracy says**

*Position Doubtful* is a memoir on key parts of Kim Mahood's life. She reflects on her experiences as the daughter of a white family who settled in the Tanami desert region to establish and manage the Tanami Downs Cattle Station in the 1960s, and she documents her return visits to the Tanami and associated Aboriginal communities, and the connections she forms over more than 20 years from the mid-1990s.

The landscape is central to, and the catalyst for, Mahood's book. The Tanami is rooted in Mahood's psyche. It is the place where she feels most intensely alive. Mahood inherited from her father an aeronautical map of the Tanami Downs station, which spanned some 1,500 square miles. The map contained annotations of landmarks labeled "Position Doubtful". So commenced Mahood's journey to learn everything possible about her country. With the assistance of whitefella friends and the Aboriginal communities of Balgo and Mulan, Mahood maps not just the geographical features of the lake and desert country, but also the stories of the plants, creatures, spirits and people that inhabit it. Through this process, she becomes an integral member of those communities. Yet the ties that bind all together are both strong and ephemeral. Mahood often uses the term *transitory* to describe her place in the landscape. Ultimately, the landscape is bigger than us all. When we are gone the landscape will still be here, but the landscapes embodies the memories of those that have interacted with it.

*Position Doubtful* is rich, textured, multi-layered and brimming with metaphor and nuance. I suppose this is not surprising given Kim Mahood is also an artist and poet, as well as an author. She brings a mystical quality to her writing. She paints in words. Her prose is wonderfully descriptive and lyrical. The stories are humorous, poignant and sometimes tragic. Kim Mahood illustrates that Australia is a land of contrasts and deep divisions, while at the same time we have much in common. My feeling towards the book also illustrate that contrast. I loved it and yet I felt a deep melancholy as if the book was documenting the final days of a culture that had for so long been vital to this landscape. *Position Doubtful* is a must-read for many Australians who want to learn more about what it means to be an indigenous Australian living in a remote community. Mahood is very insightful about the complex interactions between whitefellas and blackfellas. She leaves it to her readers to infer the implications for closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-

Aboriginal Australians, and reconciliation more generally.

It seems to me that the position on a range of contentious issues hinted at in this book — such as how to meaningfully achieve reconciliation between the First Australians and the descendants of white settlers, what constitutes an appropriate allocation of resources between country and city, and the prioritisation of policies for the collective good relative to private gain — remains as doubtful as ever.

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### **Hildegunn says**

Kim Mahood has written a gem of a book. As a visual artist, she describes the landscape of central Australia with a focus on details that paints it out for you in your mind. Her knowledge of the land comes from growing up on a cattle station, falling in love with the land and the people, and spending large portions of her adult life working, painting and living with Aboriginal people of the Red Center. I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand more about the relationship between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. It's arty, it's informative, it's funny, and it's sad.

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### **Michael Livingston says**

Thoughtful and thought-provoking, this memoir of Mahood's experiences in remote Indigenous communities has flown a bit under the radar this year, but really deserves a wide readership. She wrestles with important issues, writes beautifully about art and community and refuses to provide platitudes or easy answers.

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### **Magdalena says**

I've made rather a mess of my copy of Kim Mahood's *Position Doubtful*. The book is so full of insights, beautiful reflective passages I want to return to, and new ways of looking at creativity and the world, that I've dog-eared almost every other page. *Position Doubtful* is more than a good read—it's like a reference guide to the soul. Ostensibly the book is a memoir that begins at the end of Mahood's award-winning memoir *Craft for a Dry Lake*, working forward in time in a series of essays built around a long running mapping exercise involving a multimedia exploration of place in paint, canvas, words and recorded memories. Every year Mahood leaves her home in Canberra and returns to the country she grew up in – a remote piece of land along the Tanami Desert at the edge of the east Kimberley in Western Australia, often with her artist friend Pam Lofts. Separately and together, the pair visit the cattle station that Mahood grew up on, and the reader is invited along as Mahood works at the Balgo Aboriginal community art centre, creates a range of exhibitions, progresses her map-making project and other environmental projects with the Walmajarri aboriginal tribe of the area. Instead of being a simple memoir however, *Position Doubtful* brings together many different threads, artistic and otherwise, and presents a literary map of life, love and grief, of identity and community.

Throughout the narrative there are visual images and descriptions of image making, linguistic explorations, and an incorporation/exploration of mythology, geology, geography, philosophy, cosmology, history, music and poetry all working together seamlessly. The story works through a series of overlapping connection points at the nexus of friendships, mentorships, collaborations, and the anxiety/tensions that all integrated into a series of self-contained but progressively integrated chapters. Integrated into every story is a deep and

sensitive exploration of the relationship between the Kartiya (white folk) and the Aboriginal communities into which Mahood continues to find herself drawn, to work, to support, and to co-create. Paralleled with that is an ongoing exploration of the distinction and connection between humans and the earth:

These embodied representations of country threaten to overwhelm whatever tentative intuitions I'm trying to formulate, teasing out the root of the difference between how I've been taught to interpret the world, and this other multi-layered response to the physicality of place. It's not so much a visual landscape as a place, a pattern, a story. If you spend enough time you begin to feel the patterns of the country you are walking on. It's there, under the feet, under the skin. It ripples and shudders, so that the story you tell is subtly altered, the pattern you make is stretched and distorted, and something else shows through. (33)

As the above passage shows, the writing is exquisite, poetic, and very detailed. Mahood's observations are often minute explorations: a delicate rock formation, the texture of a rope, the sound of grass crunching under the feet, a sunrise, the smell of cooking, or an empathic exploration of a companion's discomfort. Though *Position Doubtful* is sophisticated, charged as it is by ethical considerations, the political impact of government policy, and a deep-seated understanding – both visceral and intellectual – of the ethics of colonial occupation, power struggles, and feminist discourse, it's also a personal journey and deeply moving. In every line, every observation made, Mahood's focus is a combination of the micro and macro; the personal, cultural, and the political working together to create a work that is engrossing but also dense and rich. The reader is drawn into the situations along with Mahood, in first person present tense, and yet is also continually conscious of the broader context – a universalising principle beyond the immediate:

This is what strikes me as I write down the placenames for this old, pre-literate man, for whom each name is a code, a trigger that will activate a chain reaction of associations he will sing with his brothers that evening – the three old men harmonizing with their clapping sticks, the rest of us falling away, mesmerized and exhausted, while the brothers see out the night in what will prove to be the last time they visit and sing their country together. (128)

Some of the mapping in *Position Doubtful* isn't geographical but historical (or a combination). For example, Mahood spends a chapter exploring the Stuart Creek massacre that took place in the 1920s, a story constructed from often conflicting narrative fragments. There are other stories as well, such as, such as the story of the Canning Stock Route, or Lee Cataldi's cataloguing of Dora Mungkina's language - the last of the Ngardi speakers. Mahood often dovetails the stories of humans with the natural world: the sound and flight of birds, the motion of the insects, and the way these perceptions dovetail with the dreamtime, appearing in the shape of the landscape, or the line of clouds. This presents a kind of continuous present tense that is both unsettling and intensely truthful, employing the experiential logic of dreams. Mahood's prose is crystal clear throughout, moving forward in a linear and always with a logical coherency, but the work gets under the skin:

It's moments like this that shake me loose from my own filtered consciousness into the vibrating strangeness of a world in which there are none of the contemporary reference points I take for granted. (162-3)

The book is full of death, both physical pain and existential crises that shift and reorient the perspective of the reader as any great art does, but always there is the absolute sense of connectedness between the disparate stories, between the land and the people, and between the different cultures that *Position Doubtful*

explores. Those who know the outback well, and who have had experience exploring the Tanami will find themselves and their experiences made explicit in this beautiful and moving narrative. For those with little experience of Australia's outback, *Position Doubtful* is a treasure – providing such a deep engagement that the human and natural world that they no longer appear as separate entities – Mahood bridges many gulfs in this book, crossing lines and reworking the scenes, but always slowly, sensitively, and building understanding over time. The multitude of 'selves' explored in the book create a beautiful dichotomy between the shy observer – Kim, and the unselfconscious, brave Napurrula – Mahood's skin name given to her shortly after she was born – always linked together by the notion of mapping meaning as a way of opening a dialogue between place and the self, not only through space but through time.

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### **Michael says**

I heard Ms Mahood talk at the NT writers festival a few weeks back and picked up her latest book. It is a wonderful memoir tying in her time growing up in the western desert of WA/NT and then her return visits to help kick start several art projects among the local mob, helping to get their story out to the wider world. It is also a story of being torn between two very different worlds in several layers: the spirit world of the desert as opposed to the spirit world of western civilisation. The western art world and the Indigenous art world, the local way of doing things and how city folks see how things should be out bush. The book gave me a bit more of an understanding of my new home. Excellent read even if I felt a bit lost in finding my way to the various locales mentioned in the book.

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### **Scribe Publications says**

*A shimmering, evocative memoir [that is] required reading for anyone interested in contemporary Aboriginal Australia ... Position Doubtful opens the heart to understanding.*

#### **Books+Publishing**

*An extraordinary excavation of the relationship, past and present, between settlers and indigenous Australians, deeply grounded in this alluring tract of desert, but with relevance for us all.*

#### **The Monthly**

*Mahood brings a formidable intelligence to her work as a writer and an artist, but also a sly humour here and an almost uncanny talent for observation ... By charting these wanderings with such eloquence and scrupulous self-examination, she has created in *Position Doubtful* a true map of the heart.*

#### **The Saturday Paper**

*[Mahood] is a talented writer whose mastery of the language is absolute. The combination of an artist's eye, a mapmaker's precision, and a wordsmith's playfulness makes for a work of captivating beauty ... a significant and timely work.*

#### **Weekend Australian**

*There is something profound about the directness and clarity with which Kim Mahood writes about her art, and her life, in particular her relationship with the land she grew up in and on, and her relationship to the indigenous people who have lived on that land much longer than she. As Mahood writes of — quite literally — building a map that is both geographic, social and cultural, you feel that she has, ever so gently, shifted*

*your view of the world. Position Doubtful is a remarkable, intelligent and mature work. I really loved it.*  
**Sophie Cunningham, Author of *Warning: The Story of Cyclone Tracey, Geography and Bird***

*Position Doubtful attests to an eye that is unfailing and a lifetime of looking ... She sees what she sees, and comes to her own conclusions ... Powerful.*

**Australian Book Review**

*Position Doubtful leaps straight onto the shelf occupied by the great accounts of inland Australia. Theatrical, confessional, masterly descriptive, it is hard to find one word to sum up the achievement. Possibly it lies in the word character: in the brave character of the author herself, and in the spacious, beautiful, and unforgiving character of the Australian landscape and the people who dramatically take on its shape in these pages.*

**Roger McDonald, Author of *Australia's Wild Places, When Colts Ran, Mr Darwin's Shooter and The Ballad of Desmond Kale***

*Kim Mahood is an astonishing treasure: an accomplished artist and writer who is equally well-equipped to navigate both Aboriginal and settler Australia. Her lyrical yet unsentimental memoir is a story of honouring the knowledge that two cultures have mapped upon each other, a lesson the entire globe needs to learn.*

**William L. Fox, Director, Center for Art + Environment, Nevada Museum of Art**

*An immersive, emotional and intelligent exploration into the relationship between artist, landscape, and land.*

**Mindfood**

Mahood is a writer of country. Her chapters unfurl like the ribbons of red dunes. She says 'this is a kind of love story', and so it is, a love of land, not purchased acreages, but country, birth country. Apart from family and close friends, she says, 'there has been no other love in my life as sustained as the one I felt for a remote pocket of inland Australia'. Country can get its fingers around your entrails, particularly if it owns them. That grip makes your movements cautious with the knowledge that, while you might move away for a time, the elasticity of your own gut drags you back. Mahood is dragged back. It can be excruciating reading the words of a non-Aboriginal person recording their impressions of a brief visit to Aboriginal community, but Mahood belongs to country and it blesses her with that most refined human sensitivity, doubt. She is not tempted to improve or judge the communities of her country because she prefers to love them; the whole buckled, lovely and jumbled chaos of the land. The rich pulse of country makes the heart quake with recognition. *Position Doubtful* has the scale and delicacy of desert and records genuine Aboriginal voice and emotion. Its breadth means that it is frequently visited by death but Mahood records those deaths with solemn grace while continuing to rejoice in the vibrance of the land with a calm and dignified joy. A book for people who love this country as if it were their mother.

**Bruce Pascoe, Award-winning Author of *Dark Emu, Fox a Dog and Convincing Ground***

*With compassion, wit and elegance, Mahood takes us to a landscape known by white people only as a barren and alien place of no value – except to mine for minerals. She shows us another way to look at it, through the eyes of the traditional owners as well as the perspective of an artist ... Position Doubtful suggests a way forward, beyond us-and-them, based on sharing across cultural boundaries.*

**Rosemary Sorensen, Sydney Review of Books**

*The beauty of the landscape is explored through ... indigenous and kartiya perspectives ... astute and compassionate.*

**Right Now**

*This is a book for reading and re-reading, a revealing excavation of our place and times, grounded in the desert, but of broad relevance to all Australians who think about our relationship to country, to its Indigenous peoples, to our shared history and to one another.*

**Kieran Finnane, *Alice Springs News***

*Position Doubtful is entrancing and different; it is poetic, gritty, confronting, and inspiring all at once, and offers a rare and valuable window onto Aboriginal Australia.*

**Tom Griffiths, *Australian Book Review, Best Books of 2016***

*Sometimes lyrical, sometimes grumpy, sometimes elegiac, but always frank, Position Doubtful ranges across the wide meaning of country, extending past landscape into story, family, history, politics, geology, art, memory, and belonging. It is a vivid and memorable book.*

**Lisa Gorton, *The Age, Best Books of 2016***

*Position Doubtful probes through layers of understanding of the people and land where she was born, across the Tanami Desert to the East Kimberley; it is rich with insights delivered with sensitivity and honesty.*

**Susan Lever, *Australian Book Review, Best Books of 2016***

*My book of the year ... If anyone's written more beautifully and modestly about this country and its people I'm not aware of it. I think it's a treasure.*

**Tim Winton, *The Age, Best Books of 2016***

*Position Doubtful is delivered with such verve for accuracy that everything seems to have light in it—points of illumination enhanced by the light of the country. And the figure of the author, who often describes herself in the third person, is the guiding light, a pilot on her inland sea. As Mahood modestly maps her terrain, its inner and outer worlds at once fragile, transitory, enduring, Position Doubtful acquires the aura of a classic. A book of extraordinary wisdom and subtlety ... the writing is so good that nothing feels forced.*

**Barry Hill, *Sydney Morning Herald***

*Kim Mahood writes with insight and without condescension of the indigenous community's struggle to maintain traditions and cohesion in the face of marginal existence, poverty, health problems and rampant alcoholism. [Position Doubtful], despite containing a great deal of death and desolation, is a ringing affirmation of life in all its messy, muddled, half-resolved possibilities.*

**New Internationalist**

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## **Tundra says**

It was a privilege to read this book and in some small way glimpse a place and people that are so precious to the author. I love the idea of a map as a means of linking Place, memory and emotion. I have always found maps an intriguing link with the past and the people that make them. Mahmoud succinctly navigates and captures this idea in her writing as we wander and explore the Tanami desert with her. Her descriptions are evocative, there is humour and very nearly tears. This book is what it means to be Australian. The only thing I wished for was an insert of glossy paper with colour images of the artwork shown in the book in black and white. Even though they are beautifully described I really wanted to see them.

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## **Nancy says**

**Finish date:** 29 November 2017

**Genre:** autobiography/memoir

**Rating:** A

**Review:** Title: The book is named after a term Mahood came across...in her father's account of his expedition across the Tanami Desert in 1962. He observed that the only landmark marked anywhere near his route...was marked Position Doubtful.

In this book Mahood takes us with her as she returned for

20 years to a remote pocket of inland Australia that extends across the Tanami Desert to the edge of East Kimberley. A one time pilgrimage to the country of her late childhood has morphed into yearly field trips with her artist friend Pam Lofts. "We were like migratory birds, driven to return year after year." (pg 290) Excellent book....Mahood is a skilled artist and creative writer!

**Winner of Australia's National Biography Award 2017**

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### **Review**

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## **Graham Wilson says**

It is strange to discover such a kindred spirit from the outback of the NT. I grew up in Arnhem Land whereas Kim Mahood spent key years in her childhood to adult transition in the Tanami. But yet the sense that she could have been writing about my experience or vice versa is almost overwhelming sometimes. This is a lovely book told with open eyed compassion - it sees the strange contradictions of aboriginal and white societies and how they interact, the failings of both the ones who thought they brought civilisation but as time goes by come to understand they are in the presence of an incredibly ancient knowledge and wisdom, yet at the same time a society filled with people who have all the human emotions and frailties, jealousies and rivalries but also with deep and abiding sense of land, family and care for their world.

I have tried to tell this story in my own memoir Children of Arnhem's Kaleidoscope. Kim tells it much better so that by the end I was deeply moved and felt like I had found a connection to another part of my NT soul. And while the book does not give great praise to the white people who mix with the aboriginal people of these place or to the pastoral industry neither does it take the easy critical path - it sees that white and black destinies in this land are now inextricably linked - it now belongs to us all. I could not agree more!

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## **Calzean says**

Mahood way of writing is vivid and imaginary; not surprisingly she is an artist.

This memoir traces her love of the Tanami desert, mapping, art, Aboriginal people and the land.

Although she spends months each year with the same people in the same region she appreciates she can never fully understand Aboriginal culture. She is an insider looking around her, appreciative of the honour she has been given but at the end of the day she is still a white person.

Her stories of her trips mainly to draw artistic maps of the people, land and events are quite unique. She is able to prise some of the stories from her travelling partners but she never knows what has been hidden from her.

The book wobbles along at times describing the mundane but then wham some story, some person, something happens.

It does have one of the more meaningful book titles I have seen for a long time.

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### **Alison says**

It's hard to know where to classify this book. To call it a memoir feels too small, too trivialising, yet the strength of this book is that it examines such big topics - cosmology, politics, art, and cartography - through such a personal lens. Mahood avoids answers, or even really questions, in this recounting of a journey into Country, and infuses her prose with grief, admiration, frustration, more grief, and occasionally a little peace. The book draws sharp portraits, of her friends, her family, and her frenemies, these portraits are a large source of the delight in the book, but Mahood never lets us forget that we are looking through her eyes. In the end, the book gives a glimpse of the world as she analyses it, and also as she feels it, and in this way it burrows deep somewhere inside.

I was stuck reading this book mostly at night, before falling asleep, which made it more disjointed than I suspect it needed. I found Mahood's adventures infiltrating my dreams, wrapping around my Canberra life with this other life in the desert. I've never had that happen with a book before, not regularly, and never so seamlessly. It was both disconcerting, and kinda beautiful.

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