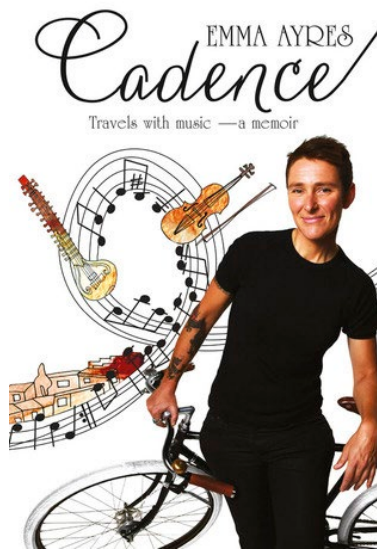


Featured Title

Cadence / Emma Ayres Non Fiction 2014



In her provocative, intelligent, surprising and funny memoir, Emma cycles her way from England to Hong Kong with a violin she calls Aurelia strapped to her back.

But it is also a journey through the keys, and the music that inspired, shaped and provided refuge for Emma throughout her travels with music.

Emma Ayres is an accomplished viola player who has recently played with the Afghan Youth Orchestra and the Bombay Chamber Orchestra, about which she made two radio documentaries.

'To share the value of music is the resolve of my life.'

Review (Jennifer Cameron-Smith)

<https://www.goodreads.com/>

'Cadences are waypoints in the music, places where you can take a breather, readjust your instrument and hurtle on to the next bit of the adventure.'

On 9 December 2000, Emma Ayres accompanied by Vita (her bicycle) and Aurelia (a three quarter length violin, borrowed from a student) arrived in Hong Kong. It was the end of a 16,000 kilometre journey that had started in England one Friday many months earlier. This is a book about a number of different aspects of life: about experiencing and being; about travel and music; about journeying through the past, making choices in the present and choosing possibilities for the future. Emma structures her memoir around musical keys, and writes of her own musical adventures and loves.

'Our lives are full of interrupted cadences, full of moments when the direction is changed.'

Interspersed with Emma's descriptions of her journey to Hong Kong are memories of her childhood. Some memories are more positive than others and, if cycling provides a means of escape and enabling a buffer of distance from the past, then cycling 16,000 kilometres mostly alone provides an opportunity for a very considered introspective analysis.

'To move forward, we need to make decisions. Whether they are right or wrong.'

But during her journey, in the present, Emma (mostly) enjoys the different experiences the journey affords. Being mistaken for a man ('Emmett') in Pakistan undoubtedly makes aspects of that part of her journey easier. In most places, music transcends many barriers, and in some cases even international borders.

'Then you are very brave. This is your courage.'

I read this book because Emma Ayres is one of my favourite radio presenters. For the past few years I have been listening to her breakfast show on ABC Classic FM while I walk for between one and two hours most mornings. I've learned a lot about music – yes, even though I can't read it or play an instrument – and have made the acquaintance of many new (to me) composers and pieces of classical music.

Emma Ayres is probably known to most Australian readers of my blog, but perhaps not to others so let's start with a potted bio. Born in England in 1967, Ayres is a professional musician – a viola player in fact – who has also worked as a radio presenter. She lived in Hong Kong for eight years, playing with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, but in 2000 she rode a bicycle, fundraising for charity, from Shropshire, England, through the Middle East and central Asia, to Hong Kong. She moved to Australia in 2003, and worked as an ABC Classical Music radio presenter for eight years, 2008 - 2014.

Now to the memoir. *Cadence* is ostensibly a travel memoir, but it covers a lot of groundand includes her childhood, her reflections on her life as a musician, and her analyses of classical music. Some of her technical descriptions went over my head, but I found her discussions of composers to be deeply interesting. And it's all told with a thoughtful philosophical underpinning.

Cadence is an excellent title for a musician's memoir, and she plays with its meanings throughout, referring, for example, to a "perfect cadence", or a "slow cadence", or more frequently to "interrupted cadences ... moments when the direction is changed".... Although the bicycle trip provides her memoir's chronological backbone, she skips around frequently, going backwards to her childhood and early years as a musician and forwards to her life after the trip when she briefly toyed with being a cellist. It can take a little concentration to keep track of exactly which part of her life she is writing about at any one time, but it's not too hard. After all ...

Cadences are waypoints in the music, places where you can take a breather, readjust your instrument and hurtle on to the next bit of the adventure.

I greatly enjoyed Ayres' reflections on life and travel. The book is full of her insights, many learnt on the road. For example, regarding the challenge of deciding whether to do the trip she says:

If you are not sure whether or not you should do something, ask your ninety-year-old self.

At another point she discusses how much she loved Pakistan despite all the nay-saying she had received when she was planning her trip. She was treated, she writes, almost without exception, with kindness and generosity everywhere she went. "Do we make our own welcome?" she wonders, and goes on to suggest that before we criticise another country, we should look at ourselves first.

Being a woman cycling alone is risky business, particularly in some of those male-dominated countries through which she travelled. She frequently took advantage of her androgynous look, helping it along by keeping her hair very short and wearing non-feminine clothes (where she could). Consequently, she was regularly taken for a man. She discusses gender often, commenting on how we are ruled by it and its associated expectations. She sees herself as "a border dweller in the world of gender"....

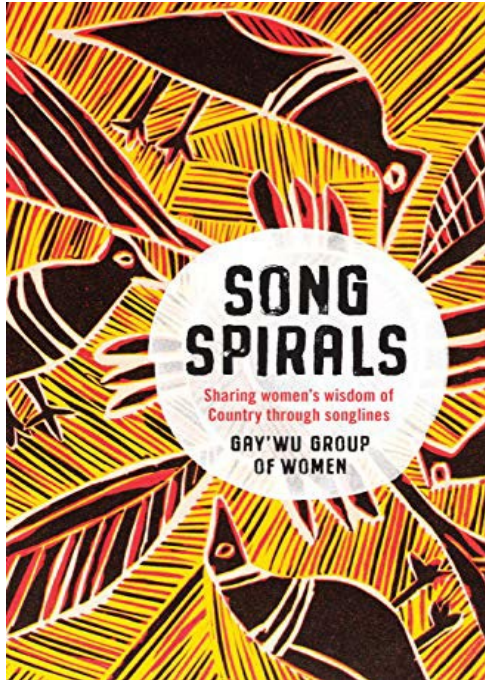
Another theme that runs through the book is the idea of being in the moment. She tells the story of being taken to task for reading Anna Karenina when on a bus in Pakistan. Her young seat-mate is mystified by her passionate rendering to him of the story, saying to her "but you are here!" She genuinely sees his point, and puts the book down. Later in the trip, she regrets not spending more time with a fellow-traveller who crosses her path because "I was too focused on destination and again forgot the importance of the here and now".

Cadence is a generous, warm-hearted book which abounds with travel anecdotes to delight any lover of travel literature. There are scary moments, and funny ones, and others that are just plain interesting. It also contains intelligent, considered insights into music, some of which I plan to share in a follow-up post. For now, I'll conclude with a comment she makes early in the book: "Travel", she says, "goes inwards as much as outwards". That is exactly what she demonstrates with this book. I can see why all those in my reading group who read the book urged it onto the next person.

Featured Title

Songspirals : sharing women's wisdom of country through songlines / Gay'wu group of women/ Burarrwana, Laklak Non Fiction 2019

Co-winner of the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Non-fiction 2020



'We want you to come with us on our journey, our journey of songspirals. Songspirals are the essence of people in this land, the essence of every clan. We belong to the land and it belongs to us. We sing to the land, sing about the land. We are that land. It sings to us.'

Gay'wu Group of Women is the 'dilly bag women's group', a deep collaboration between five Yolngu women and three non-Aboriginal women over a decade - all co-authors of two other books.

The group is made up of Laklak Burarrwanga, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Kate Lloyd, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr, Djawundil Maymuru.

Aboriginal Australian cultures are the oldest living cultures on earth and at the heart of Aboriginal cultures is song. These ancient narratives of landscape have often been described as a means of navigating across vast distances without a map, but they are much, much more than this. Songspirals are sung by Aboriginal people to awaken Country, to make and remake the life-giving connections between people and place. Songspirals are radically different ways of understanding the relationship people can have with the landscape. For Yolngu people from North East Arnhem Land, women and men play different roles in bringing songlines to life, yet the vast majority of what has been published is about men's place in songlines. *Songspirals* is a rare opportunity for outsiders to experience Aboriginal women's role in crying the songlines in a very authentic and direct form.

Long-listed for the 2020 Stella Prize.

<https://stella.org.au/>

Judges' comments:

The promise of this beautiful book is in the title: *Songspirals*. These spirals unfold as the reader is invited into stories of family, land and culture, and the responsibilities of the Gay'wu group of women. This is storytelling that comes with obligation and by its nature has to be told in spirals, providing a glimpse into a profound way of learning about country, culture and family.

Developing a deeper understanding of Indigenous culture is finally being acknowledged as an important way of saving not only our landscapes but our people. As you read through each spiral you hear the women saying, 'I will tell you this...now I will tell you this...and now, because you know this important part of the story, you can now know this other story.'

This generous, rich narrative helps readers slow down and open up to deep learning. We believe this is a rare and valuable book that, through the generosity of the writers, will increase the knowledge and importance of Indigenous storytelling.

The world sings all the time... the world is a sound...

In the predawn chill of Yolŋu Country (northern Arnhem Land, NT) women from all over the world trek through the bush to sit at the top of a cliff for milkarri. Milkarri is the Yolŋu women's aspect of the manikay, the ceremonial songs called songspirals. Country is the songspirals, it is milkarri. Country is the way humans and non-humans co-become, the way we emerge together...

In 2007, during Garma Festival Women's Cultural Camp, we sat on the ground with our eyes closed. An Elder welcomed us into a journey of song where we met Country and kin. As English language dissolved into Yolŋu matha and the deep tremulous chanting of many Yolŋu women, time disappeared to swim within me. Suspended in the universe I cried and cried and cried.

Sorrow, love, happiness, joy, and heartache... tears represent a being or a belonging, a beginning or an end, a journey... As birds sang in the dawn, we were prompted to open our eyes to greet them. My shame for public crying was shifted – every single woman in the light of the new day wore their tears with pride. Our tears united us. We have a life force... inside. We hate the word dreaming. We are not asleep. We are here and have all this knowledge, this life force, collective thought, a soul that is created by water...

Nearly fifteen years after my Garma experience, when I recall it, once again, tears wash through my body to pierce my eyes. This co-existing between times, where memories are vividly relived – both physically and emotionally, this is the essence of Yolŋu songspirals.

Songspirals... spiral out and in, they go up and down, round and round forever... connecting and remaking... they are a map we follow through Country as they connect to people and other clans... Each time we sing our song spirals we learn more, go deeper, spiral in and spiral out...

Songspirals, the third book by the Gay'wu Group of Women invites us to become part of their milkarri, their songspirals. As well as offering deep insight into the protocols and knowledge that have sustained the Yolŋu for millennia, they encourage us to recite their Yolŋu matha to bring their world into ours.

We can balance both cultures, we can share. We will treat you like family

The unity of bringing together our two cultures, as an expression of kinship and responsibility, is portrayed in the songspiral The Wukun. Translated as the 'gathering of the clouds' it represents the evolution of The Gay'wu Group of Women: how they met, their relationship growing, and how they regularly travel across the country to come together to write the book – like clouds.

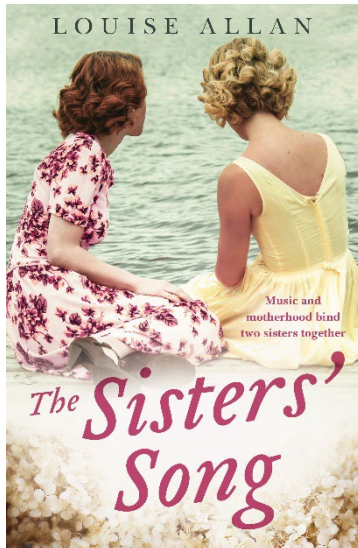
We meet each other, our collective; we come together and we separate. We rain. New shoots grow. And, when the time is right, we come together again. This is the cycle, like the cycles of evaporation and falling rain that holds us all...

As my struggles to decolonise evolve, and my shame of public crying resolves safely in the sacred place gifted to me by the Yolŋu women at Garma, the Wukan songspiral gifts me with a path out of isolation to a life of shared experience and the collective.

We are the rain falling, the waters meeting, mixing, clashing, the moisture going up to the clouds. We are our tears and our tears are this book, this book that we have written together and that now we share.

My son kisses my eyelids, and my mother is here, kissing my eyelids. The love spirals – he is my mother, my mother is my child. Milkarri brings my mother to us for our own songspiral. I cry for my mum, and I cry for all of the Stolen Generations. Through the spiral turning I feel great pride that Mum blessed me with this legacy of love and connection. Forever together.

Featured Title *The Sisters' Song* / Louise Allan Fiction 2018



As children, Ida loves looking after her younger sister, Nora, but when their beloved father dies in 1927, everything changes. The two girls move in with their grandmother who is particularly encouraging of Nora's musical talent. In Nora, she sees herself, the artist she was never allowed to be. As Nora follows her dream of a brilliant musical career, Ida takes a job as a nanny and their lives become quite separate. The two sisters are reunited as Nora's life takes an unwelcome direction and she finds herself isolated in the Tasmanian bush saddled with a husband and children. Embittered and resentful about her lost chances, Nora welcomes Ida's help with her chaotic household. When Ida marries Len, a reliable and good man, she hopes her dreams of a family of her own will be fulfilled. Unfortunately it becomes clear that this is never likely to happen. In Ida's eyes, Nora possesses everything in life that could possibly matter yet she values none of it.

Set in rural Tasmania over a span of seventy years, the strengths and flaws of motherhood are revealed through the mercurial relationship of these two very different sisters, Ida and Nora. *The Sisters' Song* speaks of dreams, children and family, all entwined with a musical thread that binds them together.

Book Review <https://theresasmithwrites.com/>

My Thoughts:

Themes of motherhood and family obligation play out against a background of musical passion and thwarted dreams in this exquisite debut novel by Western Australian author, Louise Allan. *The Sisters' Song* follows the lives of two sisters from childhood through to their twilight years, both of them living lives vastly different from what they had ever hoped for.

The Sisters' Song is a character-driven narrative, told exclusively from the perspective of Ida, the elder sister. It's testimony to the skill Louise has as a writer that this story was so perfectly balanced, despite us only ever walking in Ida's shoes. Ida is a faithful narrator, neither demonising others nor martyring herself. Her introspection is frank and often heartbreaking and her interpretation of the motivations of others is always tempered by her inclination to give those she loves the benefit of the doubt. In short, Ida is a beautiful character. I thoroughly enjoyed experiencing the story from her perspective. Set against Nora, it's easy to recognise Ida from the outset as the more deserving sister.

Motherhood is the sun that everything else orbits around in this novel:

"It was dawning on me that not all women were built for childrearing, even if they'd been built for childbearing."

The irony of a woman who desperately wants children but can't have them, yet has to watch someone who doesn't want them have them one after the other, is not a new concept to explore. Yet Louise does so with finesse in *The Sisters' Song*. It's safe to say without spoiling the novel that Nora is an abominable mother, even worse than her own was. Her actions at times were shockingly senseless and she dragged herself through life bitterly resenting her lost opportunities and openly blaming her husband and children for her own poor judgement. There are serious repercussions from Nora's behaviour, on more than one occasion, but she remains a woman entirely self absorbed with little empathy and scant redemption. I felt this added a layer of authenticity to the story that might have otherwise been challenged if Nora had been less despicable. Sometimes, in life, there are people who are born with a selfish nature; they live out their lives in a selfish manner and die without redemption. Louise has done a stellar job at articulating this.

There are indeed reasons that explain Nora's initial inclinations, but they don't excuse her behaviour nor warrant the ongoing extent of her destruction.

With Ida, Louise has created the perfect offset to Nora. By no means perfect, Ida is a woman who acts at all times with dignity and honour. She is fiercely loyal, even when that loyalty is not deserved, nor reciprocated. But we see, as the story progresses, just how appreciated Ida is by those who love her and I adored this aspect of the story. Through Ida, Louise shows how consistent kindness and everlasting love can outweigh the biological attachments a child has with its mother. You don't need to give birth to a child in order to mother them, to be their safe harbour. Novels that explore ideas of motherhood can be tricky little minefields but if crafted well, they can do much to dispel the myth that all women are natural mothers. *The Sisters' Song* demonstrates that oftentimes women can be propelled into motherhood against their wishes and instead of falling into the role naturally, they instead have to fight against their instincts to run away. For those women who do have a natural inclination towards being a mother, accepting that all women don't feel the same way as they do is often times too much of a challenge, so a barrier forms, another way that women end up dividing and pitting themselves against each other instead of universally accepting and supporting each other as a community. Mothers can be judgmental creatures, experts within their own right, casting aspersions on women who don't have children as well as on those who do but don't necessarily do it well. And what of the mother who has lost her children? Where does she fall into all of this? With two sisters, Louise has explored all of these themes and more, weaving it all through the story in a way that will have you contemplating more than just the two sisters at hand.

Both the setting and the era were richly recreated within the novel. A myriad of little details that gave you a solid sense of time and place. Louise has a sophisticated edge to her narrative that makes for a truly pleasurable reading experience:

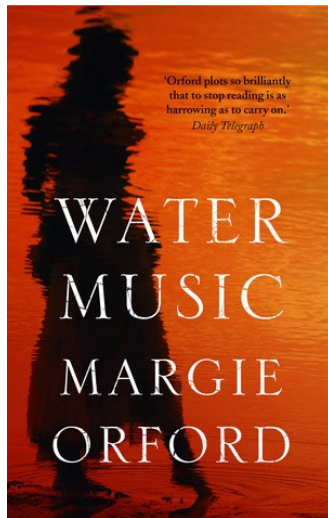
"The rain ebbed away and there was no sound except for the crackle of the fire and the gurgle of the stormwater running down the pipes. Then the birdsong came, and the night was wrapped in light, and it was gone."

Not overly lyrical throughout, but enough to give you a greater appreciation of the story. The supporting characters were all well established and unique. I particularly liked both of the husbands, Len and Alf, two solidly reliable men. They both acted with honour throughout their married lives, and while my heart broke at what Alf endured married to Nora, he still kept on, a devoted husband despite living in a permanent state of bewilderment. Len was a particularly understanding man. His unwavering love for Ida was never more demonstrated than in his acceptance of her insistence that she look after her mother and her sister's family. I think it's fair to consider music as a character within this novel. Indeed, it was a physical presence in both Nora's and her grandmother's life and in Ida's by association. Music was something Ida resented though; as a child, her lack of aptitude and talent giving her reason to turn away from the pleasure of even listening. I loved watching Ida reconnect with music on her own terms and then later, witnessing her connection to Nora through music, despite not being able to create it herself.

There is just so much I could continue to say about *The Sisters' Song*. It's an exquisitely moving novel. When I wasn't weeping, I was busy trying not to weep. But I don't want to imply that it's a sad story; on the contrary, there are moments of joy and celebration throughout. It's deeply poignant though, and gives the reader much opportunity for reflection, which in turn leads to highly emotional encounters. What an achievement for a debut author. Congratulations must be extended to Louise Allan because she's excelled at crafting a finely tuned and highly engaging novel that captures a slice of our Australian history to perfection.

Featured Title

***Water Music* / Margie Orford Fiction 2013**



A terrified, frozen child is found close to death on an icy Cape Town mountainside. But no-one reported her missing. Where does she come from? Who does she belong to?

Profiler Dr Clare Hart is baffled - but when a young woman disappears, Clare sees a frightening pattern beginning to emerge. Rosa is a gifted but troubled young cellist, and her grandfather is at his wits end. Why did she walk out of her music school that day? Where has she gone now?

As winter tightens its grip, Clare must find Rosa and unravel her secrets...all the while carrying a secret of her own.

Reviews

<https://theselittlewords.com/>

I heard about *Water Music* when publisher Head of Zeus announced their upcoming titles for 2014. I scanned the catalogue and it was the title that jumped out at me the most. Crime was on my radar, and I liked that it was set in South Africa – a country I've never been to and don't know much about, but one that has featured in a couple of books I quite liked, and seemed intriguing. So different from Britain, a bit exotic, mysterious, and, well, gritty.

A lot of *Water Music* is gritty. Dr Clare Hart (the central character of five Margie Orford novels, including this one) is an expert of crimes committed against children and is called in to advise on a very young girl found naked and freezing in the woods; and then when a teenage girl goes missing. The little girl is malnourished and so pale she could hardly have seen daylight – she is wrapped in layers of mystery and questions, and she sets in motion a dramatic and trying week for Clare Hart.

The teenage girl, Rosa, is reported missing by her grandfather, with whom she lives, and Clare takes on the case out of her own concern and sympathy for both the girl and the grandfather. Her department is under threat and she is targeted for not being a police officer, only a civilian, getting involved in police business; but Clare is a specialist, an expert with sharp instincts and deep feeling for the persecuted victim.

Her own story comes slowly to light throughout the book, as does her relationship with an officer, Reidwaan Faizal, who is a fascinating, dark character. Early in the book she finds out that she is pregnant, and she battles this issue, alone, as she tries to discover the truth of what happened to these two poor girls.

I loved the twists and turns of this book, the truly unknowable nature of the next chapter. Orford surprised me on almost every page, with short sharp chapters driving the pace and building the tension. Clare is relentless in her pursuit of the truth, and unwaveringly brave in the face of danger as she delves deeper into the underside of Cape Town. As I read I could not guess what had happened, how this little girl had been left alone under some plastic, tethered to a tree; how Rosa went missing three weeks ago and no one has noticed until now. Who was really involved? Who knows more than they are telling? And what do they know? Why are they keeping secrets? My mind was spinning with questions and I read on compulsively.

This is the first Margie Orford novel I've read and I will definitely look into her previous novels. Her plotting is excellent, and her writing is both engaging, moving and atmospheric, conveying the feelings of the characters and the grim realities of the situations so vividly. I felt uncomfortable and scared with Clare, and desperate with her when she is grasping for clues and fighting to get to the hidden truths. Read this book!

<http://www.thebookbag.co.uk/>

Life is political.

Whether that is what Orford set out to do, or whether she does so accidentally by virtue of just telling it like it (most probably) is, I don't know. And it doesn't matter.

The book succeeds on both fronts.

If you're not interested in South Africa – there's still a gripping tale to take you on the roller-coaster ride of a forensic specialist's attempts to find the mother of a child found abandoned and tethered in the woods barely alive. These attempts are complicated when a grandfather turns up to the press conference begging help in the search for his missing granddaughter, a talented cellist, at 19 years of age technically too old to fall within the remit of Section 28. But Clare Hart's not above bending the rules, now and then.

All the usual genre requirements are met: the complicated love-life (Hart's lover is an undercover cop, never around when you need him – unless, maybe, you REALLY DO need him), an unwanted pregnancy, ageing / dying parents, inter-departmental squabbles, solid loyalties of the kind that will ignore all career-threatening orders from above. There are the wayward teenagers who may or may not be caught up in the gang thing, the drugs thing.

Trails twist and turn and go cold and heat up... and eventually, our heroine is going to find herself down the proverbial mine...

If you are interested in South Africa you might pay a bit more notice to the corruption that's making Hart's job harder. You might wonder about the casual misogyny that's far worse, far more physical, than we'd expect anyone to be allowed to get away with on our home turf. You might think a bit harder about the harsh divides between the estates, the castle, and the townships, and the basic underlying fear that seems to pervade everyone's life, no matter what their social strata.

I've no way of knowing how accurate a portrayal Orford gives us, but she lives in Cape Town, so maybe she should know.

What I can say with certainty is that the voice is succinctly South African. Only occasional lapses into Afrikaans to give a touch of authenticity, without being enough to annoy those of us who struggle if we can't accurately translate what we're given, for the most part, that voice relies on a particularly clipped way of speaking, that flows over from the dialogue into the style of the whole exposition.

I do have a criticism in that a lot of the characters weren't distinct enough for me to remember who was who, which is a shame because it's the only weakness it what would otherwise be a brilliant production. As it is, the plot carries the weight effortlessly driving forward, and the social comments adds flavour.

Short of perfection, but a gut-wrenching read all the same.

It's traditional to point interested readers at something else they might like, but to be honest this is the first thing I've read that treats crime in South Africa (or Africa at large) the same way writers treat it in say, the UK or the US, without any lightening of humour or justification of history, but as a pure and simple tale of nasty people doing horrible things.