



james aldridge

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the

wings of Kitty St Clair

James Aldridge has written about thirty novels for adults and children, short stories, plays, non-fiction and television scripts. His writing has been published in forty languages. He has also enjoyed a successful career in journalism: his war despatches were published worldwide in major international news publications, and he was awarded the gold medal for journalism by the Organisation for International Journalists in 1972.

But it is the first twenty years of James's life growing up in the Victorian town of Swan Hill that inspired him to write the wonderful St Helen series for which he is famous. Set in the Depression of the 1930s, the novels include Ride a Wild Pony (adapted for the screen by Walt Disney), My Brother Tom (made into a television series), The True Story of Spit MacPhee (also adapted for television, plus winner of the 1986 New South Wales Premier's Literary Award and the 1986 Guardian Award), The True Story of Lilli Stubeck (1985 Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year) and The True Story of Lola MacKellar. The Wings of Kitty St Clair is a welcome addition to this popular series with all of the familiar characters that St Helen readers love.

In 2003 The Girl from the Sea was shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year and the NSW Premier's Literary Award.

'A dazzling story . . . none who reads it will forget it.'

AUSTRALIAN BOOKSELLER & PUBLISHER FOR The Girl from the Sea.

Also by James Aldridge

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Short Stories Gold and Sand

Non-Fiction
Cairo
Living Egypt (with Paul Strand)

To Julie Watts -

as much a part of St Helen as I am, and always an inspiration for the subtleness and perfection of how it is done.



Though I have spent many happy hours flying a Tiger Moth (the real descendant of the Gipsy Moth) and also a Bücher Bestman, the Gypsy Moth and the Besterman I use here are no relation. That is why I spell them differently and give them different characteristics, but I know that they too would have been a delight to fly if they had existed. In fact I have enjoyed flying them in this book, even though they are of my own invention.





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As she tugged and pulled at her cotton dress to get it over her head, Kitty St Clair was singing her favourite Highland song: 'I know where I'm going, and I know who is going with me.' When she pushed her feet into her sandals she sang it again – that she knew where she was going and who would be going with her.

It was not only the natural joy of a four-year-old girl, it was Kitty St Clair's greeting to the awakening of an Australian summer's day to make sure that she, and she alone, was Kitty St Clair and absolutely nobody else.

Listening to her, waiting to give her breakfast, Mrs Bridie MacDougal, her grandmother, said to her husband, 'I wish you had never taught her that old island song. You know what she's like.'

Doctor MacDougal knew very well what Kitty was like. It had been obvious from the outset that Kitty would have her mother's and her grandmother's persistent and fearless sort of character. Even as she was learning to walk, her grandmother would keep a tight hold on Kitty's hand in the face of any threat they might encounter, telling Kitty

with tenacious Presbyterian discipline and affection that it was no use trying to free herself from that determined Scottish grip 'because you're a bit too sure of yourself, and you'll only get knocked over if I let you go'.

With his own old-soldierly kind of affection, Doctor MacDougal told his wife, 'You don't have to worry, Bridie. Kitty will always know where she is going — like her mother.' To make his point, it was the doctor who had taught Kitty those two lines of the Highland ballad although it was all he remembered of it. The first time Kitty heard it she told her grandfather, 'That's the best song ever, Grandpa, and I'll sing it all the time.' Which she did as she grew up, humming or singing it at critical moments, or during thinking moments, but without ever knowing the rest of the story behind it.

Originally, Kitty's mother, Fay MacDougal, had stayed on with her parents in the Victorian town of Kerang so that Kitty could have a few years of normal infancy, but the time came when Fay had to leave Kitty with her grandparents and resume her curious life – aerobatic flying in a Gypsy Moth with her husband, Jock St Clair.

It was the late 1920s, and the St Clairs' aerobatic performances, parachute jumping and joy rides, were still an exciting event in those early days after the First World War when an aeroplane was a rare sight in any Australian country town.

When Mrs MacDougal realised what Fay was doing with her husband and his aeroplane, she became bitter in her condemnation of Jock St Clair. From the outset she had thought him a dangerously-withdrawn young man, his face a reflection of something harsh and damaged in his life – all of it adding to her resentment of what he was doing to her daughter. 'He's much too hard,' she said to Doctor MacDougal.

'He's not hard,' the doctor said. 'He's a remnant of the war.'

'He's hiding something,' Mrs MacDougal insisted.

'He's hiding himself,' Doctor MacDougal said. 'The air war he was in must have left him so badly damaged that he has never recovered, but Fay seems to understand it, whatever it is.'

'It's a waste,' Mrs MacDougal said.

'No, it isn't, Bridie. Those two are as good together as you can get. They'll always look after each other, and Jock will never risk Fay.'

'But they're so reckless with those flimsy aeroplanes, and some day they're bound to crash.'

'They might,' the doctor had admitted reluctantly, 'but they will probably walk away from it. Jock did that plenty of times during the war. In fact, there's not much more danger in what they're doing than the everyday life on a farm with all its lethal machines. Or people swimming in the river. Somebody drowns every year or gets bitten by a snake or falls off something in the kitchen. But Jock won't expose his family. He's a careful man even if he is hard to understand.'

One morning Fay received a difficult but restrained letter from Jock and it was enough to decide her.

'I have to go and help Jock,' she told her parents as she packed a minimum of her clothes in a small canvas bag. 'He can't go on flying every day without me.'

'Is he in trouble?' Doctor MacDougal asked.

'It's not trouble,' Fay said. 'But he can't do everything alone.'

'So he's begging you to go back to that dangerous flying and parachute jumping, and all that moving around from one town to another without anything decent on your back.'

'Don't blame Jock,' Fay told her mother. 'He hasn't asked me to come, but I know what he's going through, and anyway, it's time I went back to doing the flying with him, if you'll look after Kitty for a while.'

Kitty was so like her mother that when she was left alone with her grandparents she made an establishment of her childish independence, as well as what her grandfather called her 'conviction in curiosity'. It was such an echo of their own daughter that Kitty more than compensated the MacDougals for Fay's absence. It was not only Kitty's temperament or self-reliance ('Let me do it') but the way Fay had taught her to use the big house and large garden as her private world. Fay's invention at Kitty's age was to use the house and the garden to create a variation of the world's continents and towns and big flowing rivers. What Kitty did in her mother's absence was to make it a map of where her parents were flying on any given day. But whereas Fay had copied her geography from the big globe in her father's study, Kitty depended on Dr MacDougal to invent one

place or another where Fay and Jock were flying and living out their nomadic lives.

While Kitty was happy organising their flights and their stop-overs, Fay and Jock had their own routine. It was Fay who organised the schedules and the stopovers in one boarding house or another. It was Fay who made friends wherever they went, but it was Jock who checked and double-checked every aspect of the Gypsy and the flights they took. When it was Fay's turn to fly he wouldn't let her take off unless he had tested the Gypsy himself.

But the day inevitably arrived when Fay came home to get Kitty, and thereafter, while Jock flew the Gypsy from the front cockpit, Fay strapped the four-year-old Kitty on her lap in the back cockpit and in one town or another she brought Kitty into their curious existence, which meant finding time to catch up on bathing and washing clothes and living as orderly a life as possible. It also began Fay's daily instruction in Kitty's education which she refused to neglect, no matter what the circumstances.

By the time she was six Kitty no longer sat on her mother's lap in the front cockpit as they moved from town to town. Instead, she was able to fold herself into the specially adapted luggage space behind the rear cockpit. How Kitty survived in that luggage hold when they were thousands of feet in the air was always a question for local people to ask. To which Kitty would reply, 'It's easy. I do my homework so don't ask.' Kitty usually had bold answers to any intrusive questions about her unusual life.

Jock had heard that cocksure response for the first time in the riverside town of Evoca, a Victorian fruit-growing town surrounded by orchards, vineyards and orange groves, held together by the Murray River. Jock heard it when the Gypsy was surrounded by curious spectators in the showgrounds they were flying from, and he decided that he ought to have an exact answer rather than one of Kitty's exaggerations. The day's flying was over and they were packing up their flying kit of helmets and goggles and the stick control of the Gypsy, preparing to join Fay who was waiting outside the main gate of the showgrounds.

Jock said to Kitty in his dry way, 'Are you doing your lessons in the baggage hold when we are in the air? Is that what you're saying?'

'Of course.' Kitty always raised her voice when talking to her father because his wounds had made him a little deaf in one ear. 'It's a good place to think when I'm thinking and thinking, but it's a bit noisy and everything keeps vibrating like this . . .' She shivered her body and vibrated her head. 'Then I can't write properly.'

Jock knew by now that Kitty's 'of course' was the only kind of response he would get from his daughter because Kitty understood her father's brusque way of talking, and her response to it was her own way of establishing her authority.

'Am I supposed to believe that?' he asked her now.

'Of course, Papa, but you don't have to worry about me,' she said to him.

As he pulled a canvas cover over the two cockpits, a thought occurred to him as it often did. 'You weren't sick, were you, when we hit those hot air bumps yesterday morning?' Flying to Evoca the day before it had been a hot and dusty flight all the way along the Murray River, and thick clouds from a Mallee dust storm rising from the blanket of red earth meant a very bumpy ride for the three of them in the Gypsy. Remembering in the war how often young and inexperienced pilots in his flight had been sick during the violent buffeting of their fighter-planes when the weather was bad, Jock had realised almost as an afterthought what Kitty must have been going through in the baggage hold during that bumpy ride, even though she hadn't complained about it.

'I wasn't sick, Papa,' she answered, 'and I didn't mind the bumps. But when I dropped my pencil under my feet, I didn't want to put my head down to find it because I knew I would be sick if I did, and I'd be twisted up too.' And she said again, 'I wasn't sick because I'm like Mama who is never sick, is she?' Then she added, 'Were you ever sick, Papa? I mean in the war.'

Jock's usual answer about the war was a deliberate sharp dismissal. 'I can't remember . . . '

But once more Kitty persisted. 'You always say that when I ask you about the war. So why can't you remember?'

With another usual answer he said, 'I was in the war, and that's all I remember.'

'Poor Papa,' Kitty said as she packed into a canvas bag the other helmets and goggles they used for the joy riders. 'In any case,' he said, 'you are growing out of that damned baggage hold, aren't you, so now I'll have to worry about you.'

'You and Mama worry about me all the time,' Kitty pointed out. 'I always hear it when you talk about me to yourselves. But Mama thinks about you too, and so do I, and she's told me about all the things you had to do when you were fighting in the war and how cruel it was and how much you hated it.'

'You don't have to know about that either,' Jock said.

'But it was cruel, wasn't it?'

'If it was, then it's better forgotten,' he said. 'So we'll forget it.'

But Kitty had no intention of giving up yet, because it was rare that she even got this far talking to her father about himself in the war. 'You always say to forget it,' she told him. 'But there are lots of other things you don't want me to know about.'

'How do you know that?' Jock said.

'Because sometimes you and Mama talk to each other in a way that I can't understand, so that I don't know what you're saying. That's when you don't want me to know about something.'

'Then you shouldn't listen,' Jock told her.

'Even if I don't listen, you go on worrying about flying anyway, don't you?' she said. 'Only . . . if it's dangerous to fly, Papa, isn't it funny that we don't ever think about it when we are flying in the air? It's only when you are back on the ground that you start thinking about it.'