



# Glenda Adams

Winner of the NSW Premier's

Award in 1987 ☐ Winner of the

Miles Franklin Award in 1988

## Dancing on Coral

☐ "A book of enormous variety

... a comic epic and sharp satire

... a voyage of liberation."

Elizabeth Jolley ☐ "A revelation

of the bizarre ... an ebullient comedy

... wonderfully satisfying and

enriching." Kate Grenville



# DANCING ON CORAL

GLEND A ADAMS



*All characters in this book are  
entirely fictitious, and no reference  
is intended to any living person.*

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The rooster was crowing, at two in the afternoon, and the cicadas had started up again after their lunchtime quiet.

"It's a case of too much noise," said Henry Watter, the father of Lark. "Far too much noise." He was in the basement working on his project. He seized the hammer and rushed into the backyard. He thrust the rooster into the small wooden crate that rested under the gum tree within the circle of chicken wire that formed its coop and hammered it shut, the sun glinting on the hammerhead and on the lenses of his metal-rimmed glasses. The Bakers' dog next door started barking. The rooster continued crowing. From farther off came the buzz of a lawnmower.

Lark watched the hammering, then went back to looking through the old seventy-eights and the sheet music stacked near the pianola—Caruso singing "*Vesti la giubba*," a silly song called "I Lift Up My Finger and I Say Tweet, Tweet," and polonaises and rhapsodies played by Ignaz Friedman. She had already saved a hundred pounds, almost enough for a one-way passage to somewhere, Singapore or Ceylon perhaps, and she had arranged for an interview with Qantas to be an air hostess, after her exams. That was one way to get away.

Lark's father rushed into the house, then returned to the backyard with several army blankets and a tattered French flag, which he draped over the crate, layer on layer, creating night for the confused bird.

"Sits there like a stunned mullet," said Henry Watter.

"Do you think that's wise, Henry?" asked Lark's mother from under her pink cloth sunhat. Her hands, in white gloves, were pegging clothes on the line with such alacrity that she could have been playing a scherzo on the pianola. The gloves protected her hands from the sun. The sunhat, in addition to performing its intended function, protected her head from the kookaburras and magpies, which liked to swoop down to take strands of hair for their nests.

"Like bombers," said Henry Watter. "It's a case of World War Two in our own backyard. This country's a joke. One big joke."

The crowing continued, muted, while he lobbed stones at the yelping dog next door. Every now and then he threw a stone into the trees to silence the cicadas. And he stood in the ankle-high grass waiting for the next noise, in his undershirt and khaki shorts, which were held up by a piece of rope tied around his waist in a reef knot. With the grass obscuring his feet in their black nylon ankle socks and lace-up shoes, he looked as if he had been planted and had sprouted from those white legs now trembling with rage.

"I do wish he would mow the grass," said Mrs. Watter, whipping a row of pillow cases onto the clothesline. "The *paspalum* gets on everything." She flicked at her skirt.

The lorikeets, fifty or sixty of them, started lining up on the veranda rail, jostling and squawking, peering in the window, arranged a multicolored *tableau vivant*, waiting for the daily bread that Lark's mother put out for them. Preserving Australia's natural heritage, Mrs. Watter called it, and when she collected colored river pebbles and sat turning the handle of the little barrel to polish them, she also felt she was preserving something Australian and natural.

Lark's father took a mop and waved it at the birds on the veranda rail. "Heritage be damned," he said. "In this flaming country it's a case of too much nature. Far too much nature."

"Henry, please, no language." Lark's mother tended to whis-

per whenever possible, even outdoors, among the noisy insects.

"Where's that cat when it's needed?" Henry Watter muttered. He swung at the birds. "William the First," he said and swung again. "William the Second," and he swung again. "Henry the First, Stephen."

"Watch my windows," called Lark's mother from under her hat. "They'll cost the earth to replace."

"Henry the Second, Richard Lionheart, John." Lark's father threw the mop down beside the back steps and stamped inside.

"Mind my parsley and my mint," Lark's mother called after him.

"William and Mary," said Lark's father. He threw himself onto the lounge and placed his hands over his face. "Far, far too much nature."

Lark had always planned to run away. When she was four, she had packed her cardboard sewing case with her supplies for the journey—a swimsuit, a cardigan, her money box, an aspirin bottle filled with water in case there was no water to drink, and another aspirin bottle of methylated spirits, and matches, in case she needed to make a fire. She kept it all under the bed, next to a large black umbrella that could also be used as a walking stick or a club. She planned to wander around the world, until she found some kind of island to settle on, where it would be peaceful.

"I'm going now," she often said, taking the suitcase and the umbrella, standing at the front door.

"She's going now," said Henry Watter if he said anything at all. Or, "It's a tricky place, the world. You've got to be sharp to manage it."

"Leave her be. She'll be back," said Mrs. Watter. "This is her home. She knows that."

And sometimes Lark went along the cliff road, above the Pacific Ocean, past the school, as far as the corner.

In that house on Park Avenue on the cliff in Sydney, Henry Watter sat memorizing *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*.

Lark was sorting through the records, as usual.

"Hold it," cried Henry Watter. "Let's do 'No News.' I'll be the servant." He had caught sight of the old Frank Crumit seventy-eight called "No News," a comic dialogue between a man and his servant.

Lark sighed. "Why don't you do some more work on your project?"

"You be the master," said Henry Watter, undeterred.

"Any news?" said Lark reluctantly, paraphrasing the record, trying to get it over and done with.

"'No sir. Everything's just about the same as when you went away.'" Henry Watter threw himself into the part, scraping and bowing in front of Lark. "'Nothing happened.'"

"'I'm dying for some news from home,'" droned Lark.

"Put some feeling into it, Larkie," said Henry, then, bowing and scraping again, "'Nothing to tell you at all, except for one thing. Since you've been away, your dog died, sir.'"

"'What killed the dog?'" Lark stared out the window.

"'It seems that the dog ate some burnt horseflesh and, er, dat's what killed the dog.'"

"Please don't say 'dat,'" said Lark. And she hated the way the information had to be elicited, step by step, rather than simply volunteered.

"Come on, Larkie, don't interrupt the dialogue."

"'Where did the dog get the burnt horseflesh?'"

"'Well, sir, your barn burnt down, and after the fire cooled down, the dog went in and ate some of the burnt horseflesh, and dat's what killed the dog.'"

"Don't say 'dat,'" said Lark, "or I won't play. I can't stand it. It's racist."

"Nonsense," said Henry Watter. "What nonsense." Then, in his servant's whining voice, "'The sparks from the house flew



over and burnt down the barn and burnt up all the cows and horses, and after the fire cooled down the dog went in and ate up some of the burnt horseflesh, and, er, dat's what killed the dog.'"

Lark stood up and turned away from him. She put the records back in their pile.

Henry Watter was cringing before her, plucking at her sleeve. "'You see, there were candles in the house, and the flame from the candle crept up the curtain and onto the roof and the sparks flew over to the barn, burnt it down and burnt up all the cows and horses, and when the fire cooled down, the dog went in and ate up some of the burnt horseflesh and dat's what killed the dog.'"

Lark tried to push past him.

Henry Watter blocked her way. "'They had candles burning all round the coffin. Dat's another little thing I forgot to tell you all about. Your mother-in-law died. Don't know exactly what killed her, but everyone says it was from the shock of your wife running away with the chauffeur.'"

He raised his voice. "'But outside dat, sir, dere ain't no news.'"

Henry Watter slapped his thigh, cackling at the joke, at having forced her to listen.

Lark was staring out the window. Then she started dumping her books in a canvas bag.

"Test me," Lark's father said.

The lorikeets were at the window, nudging the glass, tapping it with their beaks, chattering.

"I was just going down to the beach to study," said Lark.

"Test me first," said her father. He, too, had been preparing to run away for years.

Lark sighed. "Kings of England? Shakespeare? Definitions?"

Henry Watter pointed at the street map of London pinned across the bookshelves.

"Streets of London, then," said Lark.

The muffled cries of the rooster still reached them.

"God love a duck," said Henry Watter. And then, "God stiffen the crows." And against her will, Lark saw God embracing a duck, in front of a line of crows standing at attention.

The Bakers' dog was still yelping.

"How do you get from Regent's Park Zoo to," Lark searched for somewhere for him to go, "to the Tower of London?"

When Lark was young, Henry Watter had taken her to the zoo, the Taronga Park Zoo on the north shore of the harbor, and at the end of the day had said, "Let's catch the ferry now and go home." Lark thought he had said he was going to catch a fairy, and she was in some state of excitement as they walked down the path to the wharf. When he asked, "Is this the ferry to the Quay?", the boat hand nodded and they boarded. "Where's the fairy?" Lark asked, and her father said, "You're on it." It felt like a cruel joke. Lark ran onto the wharf and refused to get back on. Her father had to get off, too, and the ferry left without them. That particular ferry caught fire in the middle of the harbor and the passengers had to take to the lifeboats. Several of them drowned. At home they said it was Lark's sense of impending doom that had saved them.

After that, every week, when she had her boiled egg, Henry Watter drew a face on the shell, and then, when she had finished her egg, he turned the empty shell upside down in the egg cup so that the face looked up at her, and let her smash it.

"That's Hitler," said Henry Watter. "You're saving us from Hitler with that strength of yours."

"Eat up all your egg, so that you can smash Hitler," they said.

Henry Watter settled in his chair, turning his back on the map. He pushed his glasses on top of his head. His voice became soft and slow. "Turn left on Marylebone Road, then south on Tottenham Court Road, which turns into Charing Cross Road, to Trafalgar Square. Then turn left on The Strand. Keep going." And he kept going, until he ended up at the Tower. "Of course," he added, "you could go out the northern end of the

park, near Primrose Hill, and walk along the footpath beside the canal to Camden Town, then take the tube." He took care to explode the *t* in tube. "You see, Larkie, I'll get along there, when I go. I can say 'tube' like an aristocrat, instead of 'chube' like a pleb."

"I'm going to the beach now," said Lark. "I have to study my French."

"And I have to study my England."

"But I'll really need my French, when I go," said Lark.

"You'll need more than your French. You know nothing. I've forgotten more than you know." Henry Watter leant toward her. "For one thing, did you know they like to drug young girls? For the white slave trade. One of the girls at the office, way back, disappeared. Never heard from. Apparently she accepted a drink from a stranger. The world's a tricky place." He straightened. "Come on, Larkie, test me."

Lark sighed. "Name three of Shakespeare's clowns," she said.

"'Alas, poor Yorick,'" said Henry Watter. "That's one."

The lorikeets were calling out. The *tableau* had broken formation and the birds were falling over one another in anticipation.

Henry Watter looked around to check that Mrs. Watter was still in the kitchen, then whispered, "I'm going on Jack Davey on the radio. Don't tell your mother. I'm going to win my fare to London. I'm going to be a contestant." He placed *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* in Lark's hands. "Test me, Larkie."

She let the book fall open. "'There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.'"

Henry Watter sat up straight. "'Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.' W. Shakespeare, *J. Caesar*. Act four, scene three."

Mrs. Watter was putting out the bread soaked in milk and honey. The beaks of the lorikeets hit the tin pans like gravel falling on a tin roof.

"She thinks this is Jerusalem," cried Henry Watter. "Get the cat. Set it on those birds." He fell back into his chair. He shook his head for a while, then picked up the dictionary and continued to memorize it. "Martello tower," he said, "a circular, masonry fort." He jumped to his feet. "Masonry. I think I'll work a bit on my project." And he fled through the kitchen down the back stairs to the basement.

Mrs. Watter was at the sink. She shook her head. "He takes out two books at a time from the library." She lowered her voice and placed her hand on Lark's arm to detain her as she walked with her books to the back door. "But you'll note that sometimes he holds the book upside down. And I do believe he thinks he is a writer or something. He keeps scribbling things in an exercise book. I find it under the mattress when I turn the bed."

The hammering had started in the basement. Mrs. Watter had let go of Lark's arm and was now talking to herself. "He'd do better to do something about that grass, rather than hammer that wood."

With her books under her arm and the beach umbrella over her shoulder, Lark walked along Park Avenue to the path that led to the beach. She hoped to find Solomon Blank there. They had been doing things together, going out, for some time. Lark had gone with Solomon to see *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and Solomon had asked Lark if she could put on her nylons the way Elizabeth Taylor had in the movie, a kind of peeling-on motion. Solomon had graduated and no longer had final exams, only his research on Renaissance drama, and he was waiting to hear from the dozens of universities abroad, where he had applied to do his doctoral research.

Solomon's younger brother, Marshall, a year or so younger than Lark, was in the schoolyard, mowing the lawn, earning his pocket money. That was a good sign. It meant that the Blanks were around, not off at their country house or at a family luncheon in the eastern suburbs or at some church function.

The four Blank boys were named after islands in the South Pacific—Gilbert, Ellice, Solomon, and Marshall.

"Better than Guam," Solomon said. "Or Nauru."

"I wish I were named after an island," cried Lark, "or that an island were named after me."

"You'd have to own one," said Solomon, who had already traveled a lot. "Then you could name it what you wanted."

The Blanks were the most exotic family in Park Avenue. Mr. and Mrs. Blank had even taken their four sons to England for a year, for the culture, when they were all very young, and they had traveled through France, since Mrs. Blank believed the family name was really Blanc, even le Blanc, and went as far back as Charlemagne or William the Norman. For a while she tried to have people pronounce their name Blong, as if it were French. Solomon's great grandfather, Charles Blank, and his great grandmother were said to have Christianized the entire South Pacific and written books about it. Mrs. Blank sometimes called them the Charleblancs, to which her husband replied that Charlatan might be closer to the truth. It had been ascertained that Charles Blank had frequently drunk and joked with Robert Louis Stevenson.

Lark pushed hard on the rusty metal catch of the old canvas umbrella. Another year and she should have enough money to go away. That was all she wanted, to go away—and to find true love, if possible. She lay on the sand and started with *L'Etranger*, trusting that sentences like "I was almost blinded by the blaze of light," "the sand was hot as fire," and "now and then a longer wave wet our canvas shoes" would be useful during her future adventures, away. Two flies buzzed around her, alighting on her lips and nostrils, and as she read, she had to keep brushing her hand against her face.

Solomon Blank threw his car keys on the pages of Lark's book. She had not sensed his walking toward her across the sand. "'*La campagne bourdonnait du chant des insectes,*'" she said to Solomon.

“‘The countryside was throbbing with the hum of insects.’ I’ll be needing that, when I go away.”

Solomon was shaking his head to get rid of the two flies, which had transferred their attention to him. He sat on the sand beside her and rubbed suntan oil on her back.

“‘Can you justify the following being regarded as a short story?’” Lark asked, looking out to sea. “‘What does the author achieve within the severe limits he has set himself?’ That’s the kind of question I’m going to have to answer.” She continued, quoting, “‘“To die like Joan of Arc,” said Terbaud, from the top of a pyre built with his furniture. The Saint-Owen fire-brigade hindered him.”’”

Solomon laughed. “That’s not a story.”

“Why not? You have plot, character, a protagonist who wants something urgently, in this case a death like Joan of Arc’s, an antagonist, in this case the fire-brigade, and you have a sense of time and place,” said Lark. “That’s all a story needs. Three lines. Less.”

“But there’s no development, no dramatization.”

And then Mrs. Baker came huffing past, since it was Saturday and not a sign of turpitude to be on the beach, and stopped to shout that it was a hot day, like a furnace. Solomon continued to rub the oil on Lark’s back, Lark agreed that it was a hot day, and Mrs. Baker passed on to pitch her umbrella a little farther along the sand next to a friend, and her chattering began again. “Like a parakeet in a cage,” Lark said.

Lark’s mother remarked that Mrs. Baker had seen Lark on the beach with a young man. Mrs. Watter was sorting through a cardboard carton of old papers.

“I was only with Solomon Blank,” said Lark.

Lark’s mother asked what he had been doing.

Lark frowned and thought. “Possibly he was helping me put up the umbrella.”

“Mrs. Baker said that Solomon Blank was rubbing oil on you.”

"That's right," said Lark. "That's what he was doing."

"Then why didn't you say so?"

"Is this a quiz?" Lark asked. "A test?"

"Please, Lark, your attitude." Mrs. Watter sank into a nearby chair. "It's your dignity I'm thinking of."

"I warned you it's tricky," Henry Watter called from his chair. "'Get thee to a nunnery.'"

"I just have to sit down for a minute." Mrs. Watter fanned at her face. "Then I'll make us a cup of tea, Henry."

Lark thought it would not be long now before she left.

"I'm leaving," Solomon Blank had told Lark as he smoothed the oil over her back and arms. "I have the fellowship. Champaign-Urbana."

Lark had hunched over her book. She wished that Solomon would fail at something. "*Rester ici ou partir, cela revenait au même,*" she had said, surly. "'To stay here or to leave, it comes to the same thing.' And are you sure you can study Renaissance drama at Champaign-Urbana? It sounds to me like a place to study cocktail parties, with wine and urbane chatter and all that."

"Sour grapes," said Solomon. "In America you can study everything everywhere. You'll be going soon, too. Everyone does."

They went down to the water's edge and walked along the bright sand to the sandstone rock platform at the base of the weathered cliff. They walked around to the blowhole, out of sight of the beach. The sun glinted on the mica and quartzite fragments in the stone. The sea gulls picked at the bits and pieces of oysters and periwinkles. The sea was calm. The waves welled up, rose, like a loaf of bread, and spilled gently across the rock shelf, wetting their feet. The blowhole, a fissure in a section of the rock shelf that descended in a convex curve to the water, gave out a thin spray of water with each new set of waves. Solomon and Lark were able to stand right beside it and hold their arms out over the spray, although every now and then

the water shot up unexpectedly high and on rough days had even claimed a life or two. Solomon and Lark moved away and lay down together on the rocks. The water, tepid from its journey across the warm rock shelf, slid under their backs. Lark's head rested on Solomon's shoulder.

"I've never even met an American," Lark said.

"You're giving me a golden shoulder," Solomon said. He rumbled her short, fair hair and kissed her.

"It's probably just my hair coming off on your shirt," Lark said sourly, and sat up.

"Perhaps you'll end up with me in Champaign-Urbana. Who knows?"

"End up?" said Lark. "We would just be beginning." She watched the sea gulls tapping at the shells. "I want to go to Paris. 'You'd like living in Paris, too,'" she quoted. "'And of course we could travel about France for some months in the year.'"

"Paris?" said Solomon, puzzled, sitting up. "I've been there. I have to go to America. Sometimes I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"Camus," said Lark.

Very far out a ship was gliding past, a freighter heading north, for Newcastle or Gladstone, and then possibly farther, across the Pacific to America.

"Could I come with you now?" Lark had asked into Solomon's shoulder.

"I'll write," Solomon had said. "I'll tell you what it's like, away. We'll see what happens. I'll miss you, you know that, don't you?"

"Can you justify the following being regarded as a short story? 'Silot, a valet, established an attractive woman in the home of his absent master at Neuilly, then disappeared carrying away everything but her.'"

A man was now squatting beside the blowhole, and cringing



behind him was a thin boy wearing a bright red beanie over his tousled blond hair. The man sat the boy on his knee and held his legs out over the fissure. When he heard the whistling, windy approach of the sea under the rock shelf, the boy was frightened, too frightened to scramble away, and Lark thought of calling out to the father, telling him not to torture the boy, but she did nothing. When the water surged up through the blowhole, it sprinkled the boy's legs, causing him to shriek and at last wrestle his way off his father's knee. "You are such a scaredy-cat," the father said. The man took the woolen beanie off his son's head and held it out over the blowhole, letting it go when the water spurted up, to see how high the water spout would carry it. He did this several times, until the beanie was sucked down the fissure with the receding sea.

Solomon leant back and squinted at Lark. "You could be a boy, about twelve, whose mother will insist on his getting a haircut because he's beginning to look like a girl."

Lark pulled at her hair, bringing it forward over her ears and forehead.

"I've got to get back," Solomon had said, opening his eyes and looking around. "My mother will be furious if she knows I'm around the rocks." He stood up. "She doesn't want me to get into trouble before I go away." He straightened his shirt. "I think she's glad I'm going." He looked at his watch. "Lunch. She'll be furious."

"You sound like a boy yourself," said Lark, "scared of your mother."

"You didn't go around the rocks, did you?" asked Lark's mother. She had recovered from Lark's attitude and was back at the carton of papers, holding up drawings done by Lark as a child, pictures of perfect families, mothers and fathers with sons and daughters in equal numbers, all with names and ages printed under their shoes, all arranged by height. She was