



Melbourne
City of
Literature

Fairies Tree by Elizabeth Flux

“I did not then realize what a tremendous task I had undertaken, nor what unhappiness and humiliation I would have to suffer in order to create a happy place – otherwise I would never have had the heart to begin” – Ola Cohn, *A Way With The Fairies*¹

For me, the final step of making a sandcastle is destroying it. It's always been this way. I spend hours making sure the structure is perfect – completely symmetrical, surrounded by a moat, decorated with shells, rocks and sticks harvested from the shore. Sometimes I'll dig a long trench connecting the castle to the tide, so water ebbs and flows safely against the walls I have built.

But when the time comes to leave I take a breath, lean down, collect up anything I've used that has a sharp or hard edge—anything that could hurt my feet—and then fling them as far as I can into the sea. I then kick and shuffle and stamp, returning the carefully crafted turrets and towers to the flatness that existed before. Sandcastles are by their nature, temporary – vulnerable either to the earth or the destructive whims of other people. This is just a way of skipping forward to the inevitable.

In Fitzroy Gardens stands a tree that is both dead and alive. The story goes that a resident magpie once picked up a lit cigarette and lovingly placed it in its nest – the fire spread quickly, and by the time help came it was too late to save the 500-year-old tree. The dead trunk stood in the gardens for years, slowly becoming engulfed by ivy, forgotten until 1931 when sculptor Ola Cohn came along with a chisel, a mallet, and a deceptively simple idea.

It seems almost impossible to me that over eighty years later, *Fairies Tree* is still standing. The stump stretches several metres into the air, its shorn off top protected only by a thin cover. It leans a little to one side, but looks strong, and in no danger of toppling over. About halfway down, the carvings start.

On first glance it seems like a cheerful set of tableaux – a possum hanging from a notch, fairies and imps chasing after a bright blue butterfly, an emu looking over its shoulder as it runs. But look longer, look closer, and some darker narratives emerge. Sinister eyes overlooking a peaceful family scene. Two imps caught by a spider as their friends play around them, oblivious to what is happening nearby. A bird clutching a small figure in its talons.

It's easy to forget that just because something is a fairy tale, that doesn't guarantee it's going to be sugar and spice and all things nice. *Fairies Tree* is crammed with narrative, with every notch, nook and imperfection seized upon and carved away to reveal the stories underneath.

Cohn was an accomplished sculptor; for this project, she could have worked with stone or metal, hardy materials almost guaranteed to last. But she chose wood, a material that instead of repelling the elements, can be warped, twisted or destroyed by them. And she chose wood that was still tethered to the ground where it

¹ Cohn, O & Lemon, B (ed) 2014 *A Way With The Fairies: The Lost Story of Sculptor Ola Cohn*. RW Strugnell, Melbourne

lived and died, meaning that instead of working in the privacy of her nearby studio, she spent three years in the open, chipping away at a tree, both art and artist at the mercy of nature and the general public.

I don't understand what drove her. This was a passion project – though approved by the council, she wasn't being paid for her work. The days were long, with Cohn often working until the light gave out. And, even though she was doing what should have been an unambiguously generous thing—donating her time and skills to carve a tree of fairies and stories for the children of Melbourne—she faced criticism, both remotely and to her face. “Many people told me I was wasting my time or spoiling the tree” she writes in her autobiography.

Passers-by would interrupt her work, and she writes of these interactions with a mixture of irritation and humour. One onlooker, a carpenter, apparently saw what she was doing and suggested she sand the whole thing down, making it easier to work with. “But the notches were my fairies and creatures, and my intention was for them to appear as part of the natural growth”.

If you visit England's Stonehenge you are no longer allowed to walk among the stones; too many people chipped pieces off for souvenirs, or wrote their names on the ancient structure as a way to prove to future generations that they too had existed, attempting to tie their own fleeting legacy to a pre-historic monument. Instead you follow a path around them, while a hand-held guide whispers theories about the henge's origins into your headphones.

England is also home to *Elfin Oak*, the carved tree and work of illustrator Ivor Innes that inspired Cohn to carve her own version when she returned to Australia. The two works unsurprisingly have much in common – both feature magical creatures, both use the natural irregularities of the wood to make the sculptures look organic, and both spawned books that expand on the tales of the characters depicted on them. There is one big difference however – *Elfin Oak*, though only a few years older than *Fairies Tree*, is now completely housed within a cage for its own protection, mesh upon bars, so not even the smallest hand could reach through to the carvings.

Fairies Tree however is protected only by a low iron fence, more deterrent than barrier. If you really want, all you need to do is lean forward a little and you can rest your fingertips against the against the painstakingly crafted creatures. I expected to see more desecration, more damage.

While Cohn worked on the tree she despaired at the things that happened when she wasn't around – people carved their initials into the trunk, and even violently tore some of the carvings off the tree to take home. Perhaps it's because when you see a human working on something, it doesn't seem remarkable. Their hands look like our hands, so we think *I could probably do that, if I put my mind to it*.

After three years of work Cohn stepped away, her carvings finished, and overnight the tree became something separate, something split off from the person who made it. Children developed superstitions, decided it was a wishing tree, that the butterfly could grant wishes, that if you circled the thing three times, magic would happen. The questions Cohn faced shifted in tone – no more criticism of her technique, her ideas – instead children wanted to know about fairies “what they ate; whether they played with animals; whether they ever slept.”

The tree has undergone conservation treatment on and off over the past eighty years – but its never needed to be caged up or shut away. Some of the carvings have slightly softer edges now, and a few figures have been lost to nature – but, for the most part, it looks unchanged.

Perhaps the low fence is enough of a shield – or perhaps the tree's longevity lies somewhere else, sitting in between fantasy and fact. Near the base of the trunk is another fairy. She doesn't really stand out, but dressed in green with strong muscular arms, this is Ola Cohn's avatar, Blossom. The fairy isn't taking part in the fun, games and occasional horror that the other characters are wrapped up in – she's here for the tree itself. Instead, she has one hand firmly on her hip, and “one arm shielding her eyes as she reviews her work”.



Fairies Tree

Ola Cohn, 1934
redgum

Fitzroy Gardens

Photo: Patrick Rodriguez

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Elizabeth Flux – elizabethflux.com

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