

## The Paperbark Shoe Goldie Goldbloom

### About the author

Goldie grew up in Western Australia, and during World War II her family's wheatbelt farm had Italian POWs. Goldie has lived in Finland, Israel and the US, and even though she now lives in Chicago, she has never given up her Australian citizenship.

Besides studying such varied things as Midwifery, Botany, Neonatology, Costuming and Costume Design, Amish Life and Culture, Chassidic Thought, Russian and Jewish History, Weaving, and Fine Art, Goldie has also had an assortment of jobs. These include working in a bakery, a jumper factory, or making dentures, or as a librarian, summer-camp cook, seamstress, nurse, lifeguard, teacher for handicapped kids, and landscape gardener. It is this eclectic, unpredictable and extraordinary range of experiences Goldie brings to her writing.

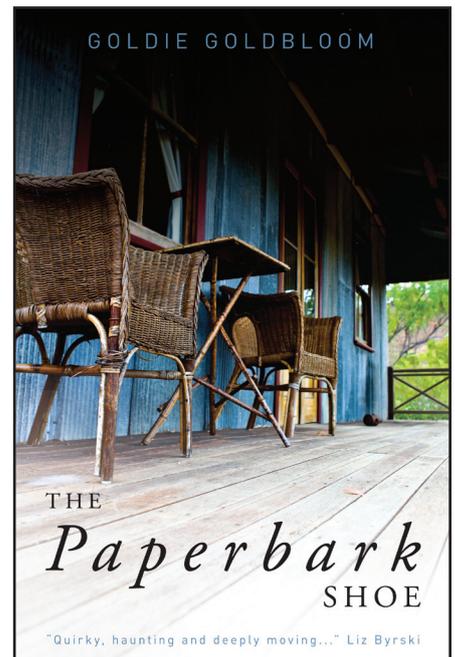
Although she won prizes for writing from an early age, Goldie was told she was not 'cut-throat enough' to be a writer. Her short fiction has since appeared in *StoryQuarterly* and *Narrative* and won the Jerusalem Post International Fiction Prize.

Her stories have been translated into over ten languages, and are often reprinted and anthologised. The American version of this novel, *Toads' Museum of Freaks and Wonders*, won the Association of Writers and Writing Programs' (AWP) Novel Award in 2008 and consequently will be published in the USA in early 2010.

Her non-fiction story 'You Lose These' is forthcoming in a Random House anthology that won the pre-publication Hadassah Brandeis Award.

### About the novel

In war, there are no unwounded soldiers. José Narosky's epitaph begins Goldie Goldbloom's *The Paperbark Shoe*. This story is set in 1944 in the farming community of Wyalkatchem in the Western Australian wheatbelt. It is also a story of the impact of war and of forbidden love.



The tale is built on historical circumstance: from 1941 until 1947, eighteen thousand Italian prisoners of war were sent to Australia at the request of the British government. But the Italian surrender that followed the downfall of Mussolini in Italy created a novel circumstance: prisoners who theoretically were no longer enemies. In April 1943, a recommendation was made to utilise the Italian prisoners as manpower on farms throughout Australia. Due to both the difficulties of providing guards and their new position as friendlies, thousands of Italians were sent to work on isolated Australian farms, unguarded.

The details which fill the pages of this book are deeply connected to this time, a time when meagre lives were lived with little comfort, with death never far away:

These are the things that I learned to do after coming to Wyalkatchem: I learned how to make yeast, to bake bread, to make a bread pan out of an old kerosene tin, how to clean a kerosene tin and flatten it and smooth the edges with a rasp, how to trim the wick on a kerosene lamp, to clean the chimney of a kerosene lamp with a piece of newspaper crumpled in a ball, how to remove creosote from my skin with yellow soap, how to make yellow soap from ash and lye and fat, how to make lye, how to render fat, how to cook on a wood stove, how to split wood with an axe, how to sharpen an axe, how to treat burns from a woodstove, how to treat burns from hot ashes, how to treat burns from lye, how to treat a man who has been burnt, how to treat a man, how a man likes to be treated, how to make a maternity dress, how to make a layette, how to push out a baby, how to cut an umbilical cord with the knife used for castrating the lambs, how to feed an infant, how to hang a blanket in the boughs of a gum tree and rock a baby to sleep, how to sit quietly at night with a child in my lap, how to feel for a fever, how to boil willow for its cooling sap, how to paint a throat with gentian violet and listen for the smallest breath, how to make a coffin, how to line it with pieces of cotton, how to dress a dead child, how to lower a coffin into the ground, how to put one foot in front of the other and keep on doing it every day.

The speaker is Virginia Toad, wife of Agrippas Toad, of Cemetery Road, Wyalkatchem. Toad has rescued Gin from a mental institution in Perth, to protect himself from the people of his community who dislike and distrust Toad's oddities: his smallness, his penchant for corsetry, his inappropriate responses in social situations. And Gin believes herself to be rescued from the mad house, from the eyes that delight in watching the crazed piano-playing albino, and from the stepfather who is repulsed by the colour of her skin. Gin longs for a home and a family – in the asylum she had torn 'strangers out of the magazine and arranged them in pairs on the floor; they [are her] family.' In marrying Toad, this is what she gets.

But she and Toad are wounded souls and this is not love. Into their lives come two Italian prisoners of war – the handsome young Gianpaolo (John) and the beautiful shoemaker, Antonio. Until recently, they have been the enemy, men who've seen war; men who bring music and sensuality into the lives of the Toads. Wyalkatchem could not be further from the war, but the Toads and the Italians are destined, recognise in each other that they are all outcasts, and discover too the peculiar freedom that war allows, where the deepest longing can be met and answered away from the enemy eyes.

This is a work of extraordinary depth. Goldbloom invites us to empathise with a prickly,

difficult woman who is also a self-confessed bad mother, and with a man who exposes himself (in multiple ways) during a variety night hosted by the Country Women's Association of Wyalkatchem. Goldbloom also invites us to experience the many layers of loss that love and war can bring.

## Discussion questions

1. Virginia Toad is an unreliable narrator. In what ways does she reveal this unreliability to us – via accounts of her mental state, her relationship with Antonio, and her relationship with her children?
2. What is the effect of reading a book where a gap remains between what the narrator tells us and what the reader understands to be happening?
3. Many of Gin's qualities are less than likeable. For instance, what kind of mother is she? What difference might it have made to Gin if Joan, her first (and only albino) child, had lived? In what way does the author manage to retain reader sympathy for her narrator?
4. In what ways is Toad a fitting partner for Gin? Is it surprising they have found each other? What are the redemptive aspects of his nature? What, ultimately, does the reader feel for him?
5. What different kinds of forbidden love appear in this novel? What do they tell us about the needs of human beings? What do they reveal about bigotry and censure? Which is worse: to love that which is forbidden, or never to love at all?
6. How does Antonio invade the defences of Virginia Toad? Is his love a true love? What do you make of his nickname for Gin? How in the end are we to judge him?
7. What does Gin's love for Antonio bring her? What does she lose through loving him?
8. Consider the final sequence (pages 265–280). Does Gin actually visit Italy? Does it matter if this final section 'really' takes place or not? What is the importance of the very final scene in which Gin takes the broken ring in her hand?
9. What does Gin learn in the passage of this final section of the book? Why is it set apart from the rest of the book?
10. Would this book have been diminished without the final section? And what does the 'prologue' on page 9 add to Gin's tale?
11. In what ways is this a story that is bound by historical events? In what ways might it speak for all time?
12. Do you agree that 'in war, there are no unwounded soldiers'?