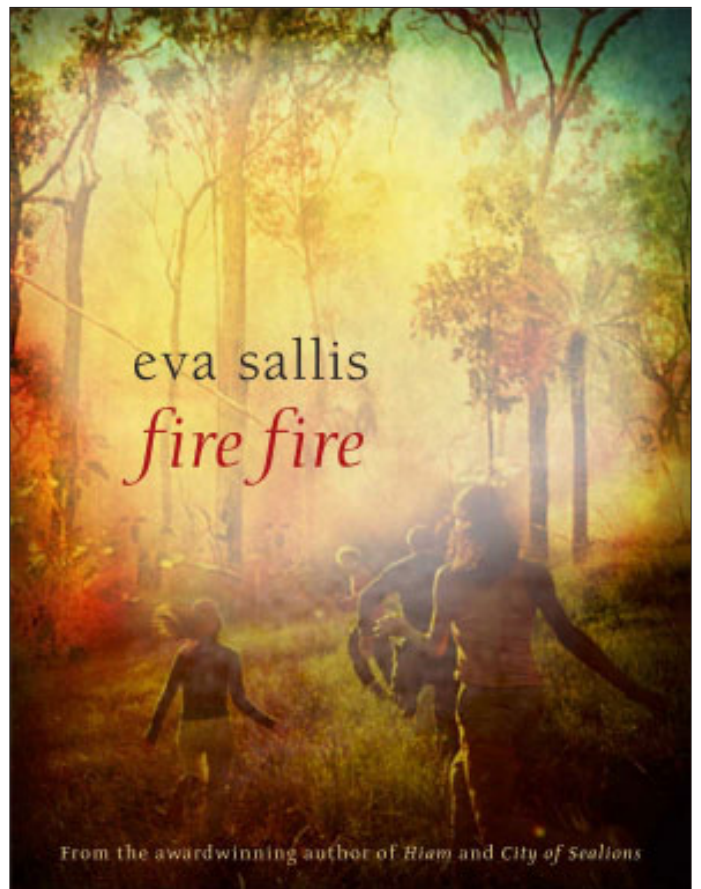


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About Eva Sallis

Eva Sallis was born in Bendigo in 1964. Many of her works explore ideas on culture, exile and belonging. Her first novel *Hiam* won *The Australian/Vogel* Literary Award for 1997, the Nita May Dobbie Literary Award. Her second novel is *The City of Sealions*. Her novel in stories entitled *Mahjar* explores the experiences of several generations of migrants and refugees from the Arab world and, through individual stories and characters, the loss and gain of exile and of provisional identities. Her latest book is *Fire Fire*. Other works include a book of literary criticism on the *Arabian Nights*, *Sheherazade through the Looking Glass: the Metamorphosis of the 1001 Nights*; and a number of short stories, poems, academic and literary articles, and reviews.

Eva Sallis studied Arabic for seven years and travels regularly to the Middle East, particularly Yemen and Lebanon. She has an MA on the poetry of T.S. Eliot and the philosophy of F.H. Bradley; and a PhD, in which she explored the many versions of the *Arabian Nights*. She is a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide.

She is co-founder of Australians Against Racism, an organisation that seeks to raise public awareness of the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers through media, arts and education.

She is currently finishing a novel entitled *The Marsh Birds*, set in Iraq, Syria, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand, and is the writer for a major film documentary on Iraq.

For more information about Eva, visit www.evasallis.com.

On writing *Fire Fire*—Eva Sallis

Writing each book has been for me a different experience. No nifty thing that helped me finish one proves transferable to another. *Fire Fire* had a rocky road to becoming a novel, or a work that I felt had an independent life. It started as a series of fairly savage jokes that only members of my family would fully recognise and laugh at.

Fire Fire grew in fits and starts. It was the book I returned to in between other books, especially when other books weren't working. It has been my messiest book to write. I have lost count of the drafts. I started it in 1997 and wrote the first draft in a month. There is not much of this first draft, other than its energy, left in the book, although from that time it has kept the play on the Grimm stories the three billy goats gruff/the goat and the seven kids, not so much by alluding to them as engulfing them and belching them out transformed.

I write and edit as I go—I think to cheer myself up with fine polished bits of a raw work. This is a dangerous thing to do, especially if you kid yourself (out of laziness or a reluctance to probe your grim idea more deeply) that a rough work with a beautiful polished bit is finished, or is a new experimental artform. *Fire Fire* had lots of these limping incarnations. It was six years before it grew legs and horns. It used to be the black sheep of my books and my friends avoided mentioning it.

I used many different sources and influences, both experiential and textual. The fairy stories of my childhood, as well as the art and music, feed into this story. It was one of the book's charms that given motifs could be woven through in organic and often hidden ways. Ugolini is named from a character in Dante's *Inferno*; the pub The Goat and Compasses has as its origin the phrase 'God encompasseth'; the chapter titles all have meanings that do not need to be understood but are part of the pattern.

Reviews

***The Courier Mail*—Steven Farry** **Trouble smouldering with fire in the family**

Fire Fire is a harrowing tale of obsession, insanity and family allegiance that culminates in violence and utter implosion.

The story treads a similar path to Paul Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast*. The Houdini family, headed by the spiritually focused Acantia and her musician husband Hartmut, retreat to a dilapidated farm in the South Australian bush. Acantia plans to raise her seven children in an idyllic environment where self-sufficiency and creativity will rule . . . Acantia tries ridicule, sabotage and prohibition, but gradually the tight-knit family starts to come unravelled.

Sallis cleverly draws out the problems of being different to the mainstream. Setting up a new code of values and behaviour requires enormous will and leadership. When that vision is pitted against reality, it invariably begins to fray. Once the rules start being bent the inevitable question arises: Why have them?

Acantia's increasing irrationality powers the book. Her manic-depressive moods simultaneously bind the children to her and repel them. Some immerse themselves completely in Acantia's twisted world, competing for her favour. Others divorce themselves from the daily life of the family, building secret hiding places and finding kinship among the farm animals. The eldest children's desire to please is particularly painful to read. In one heartbreaking scene, Ursula is asked what she wants most in the whole world. Instead of blurting out the truth, the 12-year-old struggles to imagine what wish would please her mother most.

Sallis handles the complex relationships of the dysfunctional family well. The idyllic surroundings take on a sinister edge as Acantia slowly descends into madness. Violence becomes part of everyday life as she struggles to maintain the purity of her vision. Eventually the children become so divorced from reality that they are capable of anything. There is a growing sense of dread as the teenagers first vent their rage on the environment, then the farm animals and finally upon their mother. The book follows the survivors into their adult lives, showing the long-term effects of their appalling upbringing.

As you'd expect from a former Vogel Award winner, the writing in *Fire Fire* is wonderful. Sallis captures the tone of the old-world Houdini family and their genius offspring perfectly. The complicated wordplay between the children is cleverly rendered and gives the reader a much-needed reprieve from the darkness of the story. In one memorable exchange Hartmut tosses off a homosexual pass as 'jolly fellows having fun in a manly way'. This sort of humour helps the reader understand how the Houdinis survive so long. When you have so little, minor events and jokes can be magnified and thrived upon for weeks.

Fire Fire is a dark and gripping tale that shows how wildly good intentions can go wrong when there are no external checks and balances.

Sun Herald—Catherine Keenan

Ursula Houdini has a sense that her family is running away from something when its members leave the city to live on a broken-down, isolated farm called Whispers. Her father retreats, playing the violin for hours every day, while Ursula and her six brothers and sisters run wild and try to avoid the worst of their mother's ever-changing moods. The prose is polished to a lapidary shine, but this remains an oblique exploration of family dynamics. The characters are especially diffuse, and the story is consequently difficult to engage with.

The Age—Andrew Riemer **Unsettling journey along a strange fire trail**

This bizarre novel brought to mind *Milk and Honey*, Elizabeth Jolley's equally bizarre fantasy about a family marooned in a ramshackle house where they make music and dream of Europe . . .

Acantia is a whimsical tyrant, neglecting her children, then punishing them brutally. She descants on the backwardness of Australian culture, the idiocies of feminism and of the Aboriginal land-rights movement—even though Aborigines themselves, with what she sees as their wonderfully intuitive mysticism, gain her grudging approval. Pa, by contrast, is absent, abstracted, spending the greater part of every day practising the viola no one seems to want to hear him play.

The children come to experience the agonies of adolescence, including the first stirrings of sexuality, in an environment filled with often irrational menace. Acantia banishes one of the boys from her quixotic paradise. One of her daughters mutilates herself. Ursula, who eventually emerges as the focus of Sallis's narrative, must endure various trials—the death of her favourite goat, being ordered by Acantia (long-distance, by telephone) to drown a kitten, and a shadowy, menacing encounter with the man calling himself Count Ugolini—before she flees the farm and attempts to rescue her brothers and sisters.

Fire Fire is an unusual and unsettling book. It is not always possible to work out exactly where its ethical and moral emphases fall—and I mean that as a compliment. With Ursula, for example, as well as with one or two of her siblings, Sallis seems to be charting the ambiguous, even perhaps murky implications of something close to emotional masochism.

The novel's construction is wayward, and that (once more) is to be welcomed in a cultural climate where idiosyncrasy does not seem to be highly valued. I liked the way this novel mixes the fantastical—the derelict house, the Houdinis' memories of an improbable Europe—with hard-nosed evocations of what might be called contemporary reality. It was this aspect of Sallis's book that reminded me so strongly of *Milk and Honey*. And, as happens in Jolley's novel, by its last pages *Fire Fire* discloses itself as a fable of the imagination—what feeds it, how it relates (or refuses to relate) to the everyday, and what consequences it has for those endowed or perhaps cursed with it.

Sallis offers no easy answers and, again, that is all to the good. Structurally, her novel mirrors such ambitions with considerable success. The interpolated stories, the curious title of some of the sections ('Wolf notes,' 'Abendmusik'), and

the generally meandering way in which the narrative unfolds all to serve to enhance the sense of 'otherness' that is the book's chief strength.

Sadly, though, this ambitious work reveals one inadequacy. Sallis, a practised writer, has a nice turn of phrase, though at times she can treat pronouns and participles in too cavalier a fashion, as in the following sentence about picking wildflowers: 'Acantia roamed the hills with her children denuding them of white as efficiently as a plague of locusts.'

Some characters, Acantia in particular, are skillfully depicted. The climactic passage, where the old house goes up in flames, is vividly executed. Yet the writing fails, on the whole, to match the weird fascination of Sallis's material. Her style and diction are somewhat commonplace, even a tad too tidy, perhaps ...

***Sydney Morning Herald*—Bronwyn Rivers** **An imaginative game of happy families**

Both Leo Tolstoy and Philip Larkin would feel vindicated by the unhappy family in Eva Sallis's new novel, *Fire Fire*. In their highly idiosyncratic fashion, the Houdinis construct what might be described as an alternative-education dystopia. Eschewing what she calls the 'great world', Acantia Houdini takes her children to live in a decrepit house in the middle of the Australian bush, where they are to become musicians, artists and poets ...

The tales of the children's imaginativeness are initially engaging, a small window into an unusual world of intellectual privilege. But there is a dark side to all this zany genius. Ursula asks, prophetically, 'Was retreat possible? Did the world just stay put once it had become mysteriously threatening?' All too soon it becomes apparent that the threat lies not in the external world but in the psyches of the family members.

Acantia dishes out cruelty and neglect with her love and support, a mixture that becomes volatile as the children reach their teenage years. This mother's love is poisonous but cloying. The fraught process of separation between child and parent becomes in this case a tooth-and-nail fight, and most of the children are severely damaged by it. Only one child defends her: 'She loved us all. She did her best'—but she still hurt them terribly. The paradox that great hurt may accompany great love lies at the heart of the novel.

There is also a good deal of humour in the depiction of the Houdinis, which is just as well, because their determined individuality eventually shifts from charming to irritatingly pretentious. Acantia's character is the most interesting: sometimes she is amusingly wacky, at other times she seems monstrous.

This conveys the sense that Sallis herself is deeply ambivalent about this fictional family, both envious and disapproving. It also adds to the wider elusiveness of this novel's meanings. This family is so intriguingly atypical it demands greater explication, or at least stronger hints about its motivations and influences.

Themes of cultural and personal alienation are strong here, as in Sallis's earlier works. Acantia decided that the culture of the external world was incompatible with her artistic ambition. And the children must confront the conflict between individuality and community when they are finally forced to attend school.

The great strength of this novel is its lively descriptive language, which has a poetic attention to sound and rhythm, and a fresh, intriguing choice of words. The family milieu is conveyed vividly, particularly the intense emotions felt by children, and their powerful private imaginings. Sallis also has a talent for dramatic incidents: one particular, very sudden, act of violence is so heartbreaking that I gasped involuntarily.

Yet I was left waiting for this fraught collection of dramatic interludes to gain narrative drive. Engaging and imaginative, this book is structured less by novelistic development than as a series of interlinked vignettes.

Canberra Times—Rachel Cunneen **Stoking the flames in a hippy hinterland**

In some ways Eva Sallis's fourth novel, *Fire Fire*, is a fresh departure for this adventurous and prolific writer. In others, the themes of cultural alienation, madness and damage indicate we are in familiar territory. Like her first novel *Hiam*, in which an Arab woman takes a solitary trip through the red centre of Australia, *Fire Fire* is about journeying towards insight, and the possibility of compassion. But while Hiam's psychic voyage is paralleled with her drive through the vast expanses of the interior, Ursula, the protagonist of *Fire Fire*, must undergo her painful inner journey while mired in her crumbling family home, deep in the Australian bush.

The setting for this novel is wittily Gothic, with the inexact and mythic quality of a fairytale ... Toggenberg itself is a delightfully fictitious hippy hinterland, with writers, philosophers, 'Marxists and eccentrics holed away in the busy where no one would find them'.

... It is the 1960s, but idealism of the kind that Acantia espouses is mercilessly sent up. Acantia is portrayed as a monstrous matriarch who attempts to fashion all her children in her own image. She raises her brood amongst music, soy beans, goats, Ayurvedic medicine and self-styled home-schooling, but ultimately each of them fights to be free of her oppressive influence. The inventive methods employed by the children in order to survive provide much of the fun and colour in this story. Acantia herself also gives us many comic moments. She is a marvellous creation: a woman who paints pictures of European mountains on the walls to compensate for a lack of windows, and who insists that her children sing *Ehre Si Gott* in four-part harmony before meals.

However, this novel veers between recounting amusement and tragedy. Like much Australian fiction before it—Patrick White's for that matter—*Fire Fire* asks if the wilderness offers us opportunities to become superhuman, or simply to suffer the thwarting of our visions. As the Houdini children age, it is not just their domestic sphere that turns malevolent. Ash Wednesday turns the hills surrounding their home into a stinking, smouldering pyre. The deterioration that the younger children then endure, physically and psychically, casts a sickening pall over much of the novel. The significance of fire itself is not obvious, except that its destructive power does offer an uncertain sort of renewal.

The nature of genius, and of dedication to the muse, is also questioned here. While some of Sallis's earlier characters have been exiled because of their nationality or culture, Acantia deliberately isolates her children in order to cultivate their artistic talents. She is relentlessly Eurocentric, believing contemporary Australia to be imbecilic and implicitly corrupt. Thus Sallis continues her preoccupation with what it means to be an outsider in Australia, because for Acantia's family an artistic sensibility necessitates absolute segregation.

At times the reader can feel outside the blood and marrow of the story. Critical characters and events in the novel are left shadowy in a manner that feels deliberate but the purpose for this is unclear. Acantia's madness is amplified because as readers we are not granted access to her inner thoughts, and thus we get little insight into her motives. The fragmented treatment of time also contributes to an unsatisfactorily patchy impression of some characters. I wanted the narrative to slow to a more diurnal pace, so we could better see, for instance, the unfolding of Arno Houdini's early life, as his story later becomes one of the most poignant.

However, these are minor reservations. While *Fire Fire* is an unhappy parody of the hippy era's optimistic search for enlightenment, the complexity of this particular family makes it worth reading and re-reading. It is as if the reader is a member of the Tarsini family, which is what the Houdinis call the reflection of themselves in the dirty kitchen window. This clever image highlights the way in which all the images we receive of the Houdinis are muddied and skewed. The book doesn't ever tell us what it takes to be an artist and bohemian of integrity, but there are lots of interesting refractions along the way.

Adelaide Advertiser—Katharine England Flames of Fear Ignited











...The fairytale ironies of the novel, however, provide a far more potent threat to her [Acantia's] seven little kids in the form of a predatory European count whom Acantia welcomes into the fold, his apparent wealth and lineage no doubt acting as the flour that whitens his tell-tale wolfish paws. Acantia herself practices a fabulously brutal partiality among her children, and that control through supply and withholding of food is familiar from any number of wicked witches...

Each child buys their freedom in a different way, Beate through the horrific extreme of self-mutilation, Gotthilf propelled by his mother's extraordinary cruelty, and Ursula by Acantia's ferocious response to her first boyfriend: 'Go hang yourself! ... I regret ever giving birth to a piece of sentimental trash like you!' Ursula leaves on the morning of Ash Wednesday, before bushfires consume the family's animals, leaving the house for a later conflagration, but fire is everpresent in the novel, frequently foreshadowed, vividly almost ecstatically described in the Prelude, presaged in the fairytale Ursula tells her younger sister and then presciently forgets.

Both the Ash Wednesday fires and the house fire come around again and again as the novel visits each child's individual experience of their childhood and its long aftermath. In somewhat the same way, storytelling and writing take their place in the plot as sometimes secret and enigmatic means of connection, emancipation and redemption.

Slashed with its multiple flashes of refining fire and humour both subtle and ribald, *Fire Fire* is a dark and powerful fable, a brilliantly warped and extravagant exposition of a human commonplace that sees children love and feel responsible for their parents no matter how they have been treated by them.

Some suggested points for discussion

-  Describe how *Fire Fire* shows that paradoxically, 'great hurt may accompany great love' (*Sydney Morning Herald*).
-  How is *Fire Fire* a fable? What do you think are the messages or morals underlying the narrative?
-  Various reviewers have described this book as being about dysfunctional families. Do you agree? Are all families dysfunctional? What do you think of Acantia and her role of mother, specifically looking at the destructive enmeshing of mother and daughter? What are we shown about the influence parents and environment have on children?
-  *Fire Fire* plays with images and themes of belonging and not belonging, both in a family, in a culture and in a landscape. Does the book have something to say about Australian culture generally?
-  How does Sallis create a sense of menace throughout the story?
-  Andrew Reimer describes Sallis's style and diction as 'somewhat commonplace, even a tad too tidy' and another critic, Bronwyn Rivers says 'The great strength of this novel is its lively descriptive language, which has a poetic attention to sound and rhythm, and a fresh and intriguing choice of words.' Who do you agree with?
-  At times *Fire Fire* has a wonderful black humour to its telling—what moments or passages stood out for you?
-  Art and Music are positive representations of a culture, but they are also powerful tools for control in a totalitarian state. Music is also organic and essential in *Fire Fire*, and structures even the chapters. Discuss the many facets of music, art, power and control in *Fire Fire*. What is the effect of the Coda?
-  *Fire Fire* ends with a twist. Who wrote it? Is this Ursula's story, or Gotthilf's invention? What difference would it make to the truth and the lies of their world?
-  Fairy stories and invented narratives underpin and deepen many elements of the book. Do the children escape to the greener grass on the other side?

Further reading

Mahjar, Hiam and *City of Sealions* by Eva Sallis

The Mosquito Coast by Paul Theroux

Milk and Honey by Elizabeth Jolley

Picnic at Hanging Rock by Joan Lindsay

The Man Who Loved Children by Christina Stead

Cloudstreet by Tim Winton

Grimm's Fairy Tales

The White Earth by Andrew McGahan