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Distraught over her parents' separation, Abigail follows a strange child called Beatie Bow and time slips back a hundred years where she becomes involved with an Australian shopkeeper's family.

Playing Beatie Bow Details

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From Reader Review Playing Beatie Bow for online ebook

??Jülie ? says

Playing Beatie Bow by Ruth Park
and beautifully narrated by Kate Hood

I have been listening to this on audio just a chapter or two at a time and loved it!

The setting is in Sydney, Australia, in a well worn place known as The Rocks which is an historic area in the centre of Sydney City and close to the harbour.

Built/chiselled from local sandstone and hand made bricks by some of our earliest settlers, most of whom were convict labour, its cobbled streets remain an awe inspiring reminder of our unique heritage and is a perfectly magical setting which is very befitting this story.

Although the surrounding area has changed a bit since this book was written, The Rocks is well preserved as a heritage listed area and still looks very much as it always has.

This is an area I know well...having grown up in Sydney and having spent many good times wandering there as a child and adult, It is a beautiful place steeped in history...and haunted too! It is easy to envision this endearing time-travelling Beatie Bow story unfolding there.

When a harmless little scary game called playing Beatie Bow goes awry, little Abigail finds herself suddenly transported to another place and time...a place she is sure she doesn't recognize, yet is somehow familiar.

.....

*Listening to this I was very much reminded of another beautifully narrated story I listened to on audio which readers of this might also like: The Poppet and the Lune
by Madeline Claire Franklin
Audio version Narrated by Elizabeth Basalto.

Suzanne says

I remember my trip to Sydney on an excursion, more than the book. This is a classic Aussie book, excellent for primary school students.

K. says

I can't believe how long it took me to get through this book. It's only 200 pages and I *loved* it as a kid. But rereading it as an adult in a world where YA is a thing? This is...odd.

Admittedly, this book is older than I am - it was published in 1980 - and it's essentially a YA book that was written in an era when books featuring teenagers were shoved in with children's books. I remember reading it in year 4, and...I'm kind of astonished anybody let me read this at the age of 9.

The gist of the story is that an obnoxious 14 year old brat named Abigail finds herself in 19th century Sydney. She ends up staying with the Bow family, falls for the 19 year old son, gets kidnapped and finds herself in a brothel, survives a fire, manages to get back to 1980, and then four years later, falls instantly in love with a Bow family descendant who just so happens to look exactly like the 19 year old son.

Which, whut.

I wanted to love this like I did when I was a kid. But children's books (and YA books) have moved on so much in the past 37 years, and I just found this dragged on 5eva. Especially when Abigail was kiiiind of the worst.

Eilonwy says

Fourteen-year-old Abigail is having a rough time. Her parents separated four years ago when her father left the family for a young girlfriend, but now he wants to reunite with his wife and move from Sydney to Norway. But her life takes a truly unexpected turn when she sees a group of younger children playing a game she's never encountered before, called 'Beatie Bow.'

Another odd girl watches from the shadows -- and when Abby follows her, she finds herself transported a hundred years into the past.

Much as I wanted to love this book, its primary effect has been to make me want to barf.

The story has a nice idea and goal. Abigail is very resentful of both of her parents -- her father for abandoning the family, and her mother for now wanting to forgive him and drop the life she's created for herself without him. The author wants to bring her heroine to an understanding of what drives adults to behave this way, and bring the family into harmony.

And some of the way this is achieved is pretty interesting. The Rocks area of Sydney is presented with fair historical accuracy so far as I can tell -- it's full of poverty and danger and illness. The Bow family, who take Abigail in for the duration of her stay in the past, are also realistically portrayed, both loving each other and getting on each other's nerves at the same time. And I'm not sure how long Abigail was actually supposed to have been stuck in history, but her hair grows a few inches and her figure "starts to come in" at last, so she does change physically as well as emotionally while she's there.

But I found the rest of the story to be a steaming heap of meh mixed with some points that made me just plain angry. **Warning: Slightly spoilericious from here on!**

Abigail is presented as a pretty unlikable character at the beginning of the story -- and why is she unlikable? Because she hasn't been kind and supportive enough to her mother, and therefore she must be a terrible person. And because she can't understand why her father had to dump his wife and child just because he fell in love with another woman. And maybe because she doesn't feel sorry for her father when it appears his girlfriend has now dumped him in order to move to Canada. (I don't feel sorry for him, either.)

So, despite the insistence that Abigail is in the past to perform a favor for the Bow family, the real purpose of the whole story is to force her to become a nice daughter who will believe that "adults are just as deserving of happiness as children are." (As if children and parents enjoy the same level of autonomy and power in a family, or in society.) I'm not arguing that adults need to entirely subsume themselves to their children, but come on -- in this story, the adults are jerking Abigail all over the place emotionally, while acting like 14-year-olds themselves, and she's the one who's presented as needing to "grow up"?! (Although, since her parents are clearly hopeless, I suppose she's the only person in her family with a chance at maturity.)

Then, the way this is achieved is by having Abigail "fall in love" with 18-year-old Judah, the eldest son of the Bow family (and a "man, not a boy" due to living a hundred years earlier). But Judah is promised to someone else, and Abigail's "love" never develops beyond an age-appropriate 14-year-old crush. Yet somehow, this is what makes her understand her parents, and why her father had to act on his crush. And that understanding of "love" makes everything okay, and turns Abigail into a wonderful person.

The ending-ending, where she meets Judah's descendant/reincarnation four years later and they instantly recognize their enduring love for one another, had me gagging and rolling my eyes to an extent that I'm lucky my face didn't freeze that way.

I probably would have liked this book as a child. But from my adult perspective, the story felt overly-contrived, and I really can't like a book with such a preachy and potentially seriously guilt-inducing message for children.

And frankly, I preferred "terrible" Abigail at the beginning of the story to "wonderful" Abigail at the end.

Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

Fourteen year old Abigail Kirk lives with her divorced mother in a high-rise apartment in one of Sydney's oldest suburbs, The Rocks, right below the giant Harbour Bridge and near the Opera House. Over the summer holidays, she helps at her mother's antiques shop and relieves her neighbour Justine of the burden of her two small children, Vincent ("the high-rise monster"), and four-year-old Natalie, prone to fevers and fears and forever being bullied by her unpleasant brother. Abigail takes them to a nearby park, and there she watches a group of children playing a game called Beatie Bow. Vincent joins in, but Natalie hangs back to watch, and draws Abigail's attention to a waifish, poorly dressed little girl with very short hair, standing nearby and avidly watching.

The children's game is rather spooky, though there isn't much to it: they form a circle but for two of them, one to stand in the middle as "Mudda" (mother) who answers her "children's" cries of "what's that noise?" when they hear moans and other creepy sounds, and the other to hide under a white sheet and creep towards them to give them a fright. The children scatter, the ghost of Beatie Bow catches one to take her or his place, and the game begins again.

When Abigail's mother Kathy tells her daughter that her ex-husband wants to get back together with them, to make the family whole again - *and* take them all to Norway with him - Abigail is furious. She never got over the feeling of betrayal when he left them - left *her*, is how she sees it - for another woman when she was ten. In a miff and angry with her mother for wanting her ex-husband back, she goes to the park and when she sees Natalie's "little furry girl", she tries to talk to her. The little girl flees, and startled, Abigail follows, up through the narrow old alleys and stairwells, and suddenly, at the stroke of the town clock, finds herself in a

world both familiar and utterly alien.

It's 1873 in Sydney Town, a muddy colonial town, and the little girl's family takes Abigail in after she sprains her ankle running through the streets after the girl - who says her name is Beatie Bow. The family of Scottish immigrants consists of Granny Tallisker, who has "the Gift", and Mr Bow, an Englishman suffering from a head injury after fighting in the Crimean War who married Granny's daughter, now dead of typhoid fever that took her newborn baby and another child as well. Mr Bow runs a confectionary shop on the ground floor, making all the sweets with his extended family's help. As well as Beatie, Samuel Bow has a son, a teenager called Judah who works as a sailor, and a younger son, Gibbie, who hasn't yet recovered from the typhoid fever that took his mother and who relishes planning out his own funeral and being sickly. Also living with them is their cousin, Dorcas Tallisker, known as Dovey, who has a limp leg from a childhood accident that was never set properly.

Granny and Dovey think that Abigail is "the stranger", whose coming has an important purpose to do with the Gift living on in the family - Granny is the last one, and there aren't many family members left. They won't help Abigail return to her own time until she's fulfilled her purpose in being here, whatever that is - even though, as Abigail learns, it means that one of Granny's four grandchildren will remain childless, one will have the Gift, and one will die young.

Anyone who grew up in Australia in the 80s will be familiar with this story. It was first published in 1980 but had a second life when the movie adaptation came out in 1986. You can watch the entire film adaptation on YouTube, which I've been doing while I write this review, mostly because I wanted to see if it was really like my memories. See, I remember watching the movie at school, with my class - grade five I'd say, when I was ten? That would have been 1989 I think. Well I'm not sure exactly when we watched it in class, and I think there was more than one time, but I remembered it as being really rather scary. I couldn't remember much except the Beatie Bow game, the "little furry girl" who seemed very mysterious to me, and the modern-day older girl (in the movie she's seventeen) being almost lured into the past. I remember the palms touching - that's one of the strongest things to have stayed with me throughout my life; I remembered it as being the key to the time travel. Of course, this doesn't even happen in the book! Anyway, I always had a very lively imagination that lived on darker images, so this certainly made an impression on me, even though I didn't really understand it all.

Perhaps because the movie spooked me, I never read the book as a kid. It was one of those very popular novels and my school library certainly had a copy, but I never had any interest in reading it until a few years ago when I hunted down a copy via Amazon (you can still get it easily in Australia, but I don't think it was ever in print in Canada!). I'll add this about the adaptation: it's very 80s but very good, it sticks pretty closely to the book and I think one of the reasons why my teachers liked us to see it, aside from it being Australian, was because it provides a good glimpse into life in colonial Sydney - how people lived, what it looked like etc. (If you've got a spare 127 minutes, definitely click on the link and watch the movie.)

Abigail isn't a bad sort at the beginning of the story, but as the months go by in 1873 and she spends more time with the Tallisker-Bow family, she realises just how selfish she's always been, especially in regards to her mother and father.

'I'm not kind,' said Abigail with a sickish surprise. 'Look how I went on with Mum when she said she wanted us to get together with Dad again. Look what I did to Dad when I was little, punched him on the nose and made it bleed. Maybe I've never been really kind in my life. And she remembered with a pang what Kathy had said, that awful day: that she had never,

either as a child or a fourteen-year-old, offered a word of sympathy to her mother.
'Yet here are these people, happy and grateful to be able to read and write, just to be allowed to earn a living; and they've shared everything they can share with me, whom they don't know from Adam.'

These Victorians lived in a dangerous world, where a whole family could be wiped out with typhoid fever or smallpox, where a soldier could get a hole in his head that you could put your fist in, where there were no pensions or free hospitals or penicillin or proper education for girls, or even boys, probably. Yet, in a way, it was a more human world than the one Abigail called her own. [pp.76-77]

As the movie did later, the book recreates colonial Sydney with fine detail, in all its grimy, rotten-teeth glory. It's rich with atmosphere, some excitement and danger, and is more of a family history than a story of colonial Australia. It's Abigail's coming-of-age story, a time for her to learn a great many things: patience, selflessness and generosity, love and loss, to appreciate what one has, and to make the most of things. She falls in love with Judah, and on learning that he's long been betrothed to Dovey, learns how to let go. She takes on this family's burden of heritage as a personal one, and stops whining and lamenting her lot in order to help them.

These are some very well-written characters. They don't read like characters in a book but like real people, captured by the author but not conjured by her. The story is quite simple, not over-crowded with plot hurdles or too much drama. It plays out convincingly, and Abigail is a strong heroine able to carry the story and bind it all together. The other key character of strength is of course Beatie Bow herself, who is a good counter to Dovey's gentleness and kindness. The book doesn't suffer from the film's "starry-eyed gaze" (there's a bit of glossy posturing and soft lens action that's distinctly 80s), and at fourteen, Abigail acts appropriately for her age.

The ending is great, if a bit convenient: I had forgotten how it went, but it ties everything up so well and doesn't feel forced. This is a wonderful time travel adventure story, a great journey through old Sydney Town's established streets, rich in layers of detail and history. At its heart, it is a story about getting perspective: on family, and love, and life in general. Abigail travels a long way in order to realise what her own family means to her, and how she can help make her mother - and father - happy again, as well as herself. I enjoyed reading this a great deal, and I'm so glad I did read it, even after all these years - it's never too late to read a classic, right? And read again and again, and keep the book alive by reading it yet again. It's always sad to think of how many great books flared brightly but with a short wick, to sink away, out-of-print for ever more, so I'm always happy when a book manages to survive, and be remembered and read again. Let's keep these modern classics alive, shall we?

Phrynne says

As an Australian my excuse for not having read this before is that I grew up in England and therefore did not read this at school as so many people did. I really love Ruth Park's books especially as I know Sydney well and can visualize the places she writes about. Playing Beatie Bow is set in the Rocks area of Sydney and the references to local places are wonderful. Add to this the fact that the book features time travel which is one of my favourite things and you can see it has to be a winner for me. I enjoyed all of the characters, all of the descriptions of life at that time and the clever little story which deftly linked the past to the present and

managed to have a happy ending. Beautiful.

Amanda Witt says

This was a re-read to assist with a novel I'm currently writing.

Very believable situation on time travel back to the past and life in those days.

Nadia King says

Over 30 years ago, Playing Beatie Bow fell into my hands (probably through my school or local library), and I was enthralled. Last weekend, I picked it up again and my heart still pounded at the same points and I had to blink away tears before my family spied me crying over this gorgeous little book.

Playing Beatie Bow was first published in 1980 and I remember being of similar age to Abigail, the fourteen-year old protagonist when I first read the story. The story is set in Sydney in the 1980s. Abigail's family has broken down with the separation of her parents. I remember all too well the stigma and shame from having divorced parents at that age during the 1980s. Abigail is lost, heartbroken and just a little harder. She follows a strange young girl up into The Rocks (a historic area close to Sydney Harbour) and slips back a century to 1873. She finds herself recognised as The Stranger who has been prophesied to save The Gift for the Talisker and Bow families.

Park deftly weaves the past with the present and gives readers a wonderful glimpse into The Rocks of the 1870s. I adored the storyline and subplots, and even after all this time, I still found myself connecting with Abigail who was at times immature, selfish and annoying (exactly how fourteen-year olds can often be).

I admit this book has aged along with the depiction of 1980s family life, but for me it was a true and real representation of what life was like and although, I didn't experience time travel (not for want of trying), I did experience family breakdown and it did scar me as it did Abigail.

I enjoyed the vividness of Park's Sydney and adored the romantic thread throughout the story. Park's themes of relationship, friendship and family are just as relevant today as they were back in the 1980s.

I found Playing Beatie Bow to be a deliciously wonderful and warm read, and I sincerely hope YA readers will enjoy this foray into the past (the 1980s and 1870s!).

A note about Playing Beatie Bow (Penguin Books):

It was awarded a number of prestigious literary awards including the 1981 CBCA Book of the Year Award. In 1986, the book was turned into a feature film and I think it's about time I search for a copy of the video.

Emma says

when I've had a couple of drinks and am trekking up the sandstone steps by the Argyle Cut to go to the

Glenmore, I sing to myself "oh Mudda, oh Mudda, what's that, what's that; it's Beatie Bow, risen from the dead!" and chuckle. I loved this book when I was young, it's given me a whole new way to look at the city around me, and to think about history (aside from its romance and strong, appealing characters). I think about the stockings in Abigail's mother's shop, and how Abigail knows that the past is unknowable by the present, because she's been there and she's seen.

oliviasbooks says

I still love this book (it has been my fourth time now). Abigail is a kind of anti-heroine, but her personality is interestingly multi-faceted, Beatie and the rest of the Bow Family are so entertainingly vivid and Abigail's time-travel-experience is believably painted in loving detail (up to the accent of the Scottish immigrants and their Glasgow Marble patterned woolen stockings).

There is no denying that the ending is cotton candy pink; it successfully underlines the two - disputable - messages the author is trying to shout in our direction:

- a) Real love on first sight exists
- b) The ability to love deeply and truly is not connected to age or experience.

30 years old and recommended!

Spirited Stardust says

I will forever remember the moment I first encountered this book. After a particularly mundane school day I plonked myself down in the backseat of our car and prepared for the drive home. However, instead of starting the engine my mother turned around and said, "I've got a small surprise for you. I was at a bookshop today and thought you might enjoy this." She then proceeded to hand me a copy of Playing Beatie Bow. Getting a book as a surprise gift truly made my day, I was almost giddy with anticipation to read it. I was nine years old, and although I liked it, I don't think I really understood it all.

Reading it as an adult I have a completely different appreciation of it.

I found it to be an easy, quick read. The events unfolded much faster given that my grown up brain was able to digest the themes of supernatural time travel, period English language, brothels and complicated emotional feelings much easier.

I still like Abigail and still found Beatie to be a little brat. The story moved at a quick pace and changed enough to keep you interested. I also appreciated the ending despite its sappiness and that it 'tied everything up neatly'.

Upon re-reading I'm not sure I would give it to a 9 year old to read as it does peek into somewhat adult themes, but then again those themes flew right over my head back then and I loved the book.

Lia says

Delightful. Revisiting my childhood in the sweetest way.

Saturday's Child says

The funny thing about this one was that I loved it when I read it as a child, but re-reading it as an adult I found that it had lost a bit of its “magic”. It is however still one of those classic novels that needs to be read.

Heather Twidle says

I remember crying over this book at school. It's pretty dark for a novel aimed at young adults, but Ruth Park is so deft at weaving the strands of her story that it's very difficult to put down, even as an adult. Much of this story is a curious blend of history and fantasy, but the themes she explores through the eyes of her out of place lead character - family, fitting in, first love, first loss - are thoroughly modern.

Judith Johnson says

Thanks to the members of my small Twitter book club I came to Ruth Park late in life, reading her Harp in the South trilogy first, then the first volume of her autobiography, and now this. I think I would have loved this book as a child, and enjoyed it as an adult. Clearly Ruth Park was a writer who loved, above all, to tell stories, and all her books seem to show her belief, I guess, that the suffering of those less economically fortunate, and joys, and endurance too, are worth illuminating. I look forward to reading all of her work.
