

# RAINFORREST

Alison  
Gibbs

'A fierce, fair, and  
moving novel,  
so true you can smell  
the rainforest.'

**Robert Drewe**



# *Coleoptera*

If the hippies really were going to be eaten alive by insects, as the locals were always predicting, then surely that summer of 1976 was when it should have happened. It's a time you can hardly remember without feeling the nip and sting of things. Swarms and infestations, the flubber of moths in the washing, the arch-aching bite of green ants in the lawn. Already on that humid afternoon in mid-October, the fruit flies were turning the town's tomatoes into putrid sacks dripping on the vine. Things flickered and dived in the air of the place. They were slapped and sprayed and stamped on. Clouds of gnats sent whole soccer teams veering off course during evening training and clogged the gauze on the ventilation fans at the back of the Parmenters' shop.

And every night, across the valley, the rainforest would open its canopy and let its big guns fly: horned beetles and cockroaches, lacewings and leaf-green cicadas, cricket-like creatures with jointed legs and long fishing-rod feelers. Called by the glow of the street lights, they hurtled towards the town and struck against the BP sign at the top of Main Street. Bing zap! went the ultraviolet ring on the wall of the Repentance pub, where men crunched on beer nuts and drank to the hippies' demise. 'I give 'em six months.' Nods all round and a thoughtful pause as they pictured all those men and women sleeping

naked in the hills, the hearts of their organic cabbages oozing with caterpillar slime. Even in the noisy pub, you could hear the scream of mosquitoes coming at their bare flesh like needles in the dark.

# Chapter One

It was like *deja vu*, this second tongue-lashing from Melanie Curtis's mother. Joanne clutched the edge of the counter as the woman drew herself up like a furious medusa, shaking her wild red hair and jabbing a finger, again and again, at the cigarette rack on the wall. There was a sharp crack as her hand slapped down on the countertop. She wore so many rings at once, stacked beneath her knuckles. A silver snake was winding around her index finger.

'And how old are *you*? Don't tell me. You're the same age as my Mel. So what the fuck is going on here? You're telling my twelve-year-old daughter that she's too young to come in to your shop and buy tobacco for *me* while *you*, a girl the very same age, is standing here selling the stuff.'

Joanne fought the urge to say that she was now thirteen. She turned and pulled a packet of Drum from the rack and waited for the money, noting the tuft of orange hair growing under the woman's arm and her nipples clearly visible through her singlet. Linda, her name was. Even Melanie called her that. She cracked the coins down, one by one, two dollars thirty, and with a final flounce of her hair, pounded across the linoleum and out through the fly tapes.

Mrs Chittock almost collided with her as she came in. She glanced over her shoulder and raised her eyebrows at Joanne as she and her

children made their way to the fridges down the back.

‘How are you, Jo?’ she called out, sliding open the glass lid of the freezer cabinet.

‘I’m good.’

‘How’s Mum?’

‘Okay.’

Joanne pulled a bundle of letters from the pigeonhole as Mrs Chittock returned, holding a fistful of icy poles above the heads of her children, who leapt and skipped around her like overexcited pups. They were exhausting, these kids of hers. Mrs Chittock always looked tired. When they left, the shop felt even quieter than before.

Joanne moved to the window. Melanie Curtis’s dirty white car was still parked across the street. Her mother was in the driver’s seat rolling a cigarette and you could just make out Melanie sitting beside her in her school uniform, her feet pressed against the dashboard. A truck roared past, heading for the mill, its undercarriage sprayed with mud and its empty chains clanking. Melanie’s mother gave a careless laugh and glanced towards the shop. Joanne knew they were talking about her and stepped away from the glass.

Barbara came in from work.

‘Saw your little hippie friend out there. Did her mother have another go at you?’

‘She’s not my friend.’

‘She’s a bitch, that woman, you shouldn’t serve her.’ Barbara slung her shoulder bag under the counter and went to the fridge to fetch herself a drink. ‘Where’s Dad?’

‘In town.’

‘How’s Mum?’

‘She’s okay. The nurse came, she’s had her meds.’

‘Did she eat any lunch, do you know?’

‘Soup, Dad said. Quite a bit.’

Barb cracked the ring-pull on the can. ‘I’ll go and see her in a minute. I’m having a shower first, but.’ She wiped her fingers down

the side of her nose and rubbed the tips together. ‘My skin feels disgusting.’

Joanne turned back to the window. Melanie’s car was gone. No one else seemed to be coming, so she took an iceblock for herself and went outside to eat it. Michael Phelan drove past in his new ute and she followed him down the hill with her eyes, down to where the footpaths petered out and the main street of Repentance became a country road again, banked by feathery grasses. Half a mile on was the mill. You could see the incinerator stack and hear the descending whine of the saw all over town. All day long it went, over and over, the same sliding note, and then a pause and, if the wind was right, the faint crack and splinter of breaking wood.

But all too often there was no wind. Repentance lay more than a hundred miles from the coast, behind a thickly forested ridge that blocked any hint of a sea breeze. This was part of the vast state forest that ran all way to the border. The larger town of Balbirnie was only three-quarters of an hour away, but sweltering in the still air behind that wall of trees, Repentance could sometimes feel like the town at the edge of the earth. It clung to the side of the valley, its main street trickling down the hill, past the pub, a smattering of shops, the primary school, two churches, and the gates of the showground, to the sawmill at the bottom and the looping ribbon of the creek.

Standing in the street now, Joanne watched a hippie woman packing up her wares and squeezing them into a battered suitcase. She’d been there almost every day for more than a week, selling silver jewellery pinned to a blanket on the footpath. The previous Friday afternoon, Joanne had come down from the bus stop with Tracy Willis and Rhonda McKay — well, not *with* them exactly: she didn’t sit with them on the bus; they sat up the back — but she had followed behind them as they got off and dawdled down the hill, the kick pleats of their uniforms bouncing on their ballet-school bums. Tracy was

describing the colours of her new Hawaiian shorts and Rhonda was hanging on every word when they suddenly stopped and grabbed each other by the arm.

The earring woman was crouched in the purple shadow of the jacaranda. Every now and then she leant across to flick a fallen blossom off the rug. According to Tracy's older brother, she wasn't wearing undies. When she chucked a spread, he reckoned you could see right up her skirt — hair, clit, everything, deadset.

'Gross!' gasped Rhonda, clutching her chest. Tracy dared her to go and see. And then they remembered Joanne and spun around to face her.

'You go, Jo, go on! You won't laugh. We'll giggle too much, won't we, Rhonda?'

'Yes.'

'Just go and pretend to be looking at her stuff.'

'Her stuff!' spluttered Rhonda.

'Go on,' Tracy said, 'and come back and tell us if it's true.'

Joanne had blundered forward as if pushed into the middle of the street. Ahead of her the blanket of silver trinkets was spread like a sticky trap.

'Hi,' said the woman in a husky voice that sounded faintly American. She was heavy boned, with a thick rope of mousey hair hanging over one shoulder.

'Hi,' Joanne said, crouching down in front of the woman, her eyes carefully averted. She poked at a pair of earrings, silver spider webs.

'You can try those on if you want. Here.' The woman pushed a piece of broken mirror towards her. 'They're seven dollars, those ones. They're sterling silver.'

Joanne noticed the way the woman was crouching. She looked strangely unsupported, the backs of her thighs pressed into her hams and her feet splayed flat on the ground. Leaning forward, Joanne was aware of the rucked-up skirt and the fleshy knees in front of her. 'They're nice,' she managed to croak.

‘These ones here are cheaper. Or I can give you one of those cobwebs there for four.’

*Fourrrr*, the accent, like something off *Sesame Street*. Joanne’s neck ached as if someone were holding her down. She could feel the eyes of the girls across the street. ‘Or there’s these ones,’ said the woman, leaning across the rug, her weight suddenly shifting from one heavy hip to the other. Joanne’s head shot up and she staggered to her feet. But no, it was too dark, she couldn’t see.

‘I haven’t got pierced ears!’ she squeaked.

‘Oh, that’s a shame. I can do ’em for you if you want. Just boil up a needle and bring me some ice and half a potato. Or a zucchini, that works just as well. It’s just to put behind the earlobe while you push the needle through.’

Joanne pressed her hands against her burning ears. ‘No, thanks. I’m getting studs for my birthday.’

This was a lie. Her family had a thing about pierced ears, that they were woggy or Catholic or something.

‘You can buy them now and hold onto ’em,’ the woman continued mildly. She peered around Joanne’s legs to the girls across the street. ‘Do your friends want to come and take a look? Oh, no, they’re going.’

Joanne turned around to see Tracy and Rhonda scurrying down the hill, helpless with laughter. She crossed back over the road and went to follow them, but they were well past the shop by then and it was pointless. They had thrown her one last giggling glance and, pulling each other by the elbow, disappeared around the corner of the Presbyterian Hall.

From the deep shade of the shop awning, Joanne watched the earring woman walk heavily up the hill towards the Balbirnie turn-off. There were so many of these hippie people around the place now, more and more of them all the time. She couldn’t remember exactly when it started — three, four years ago? It was just the odd one to begin with,

but then they started gathering in small groups on street corners. You began to see the same ones twice. And before long you could pick them: the women in their singlet tops and rust-stained satin, with their hard, brown bellies and silver jewellery that dangled and jiggled. The men had beards like Jesus Christ and wore soft cotton clothing that slid off their shoulders and down their hips as though they'd lost too much weight.

Where did these people come from and what was bringing them here? And what set them apart from the funny sorts who had always lived around the place — hillbilly people with their mongrel dogs and way too many kids? People like the O'Connors. You wouldn't call them hippies. They were just poor, people like that. They kept pretty much to themselves. When they did come to town to stock up on stuff, they left again just as quickly. They didn't hang around in the street, talking and playing the guitar. And they weren't the slightest bit colourful. In fact, they were all one colour, the O'Connors: their clothes, thongs, kero cans, the soles of their feet were all stained the same dull orange-brown, the colour of the water they washed in. Joanne remembered how scared the little O'Connor kids were back in primary school. They looked pained if the teacher spoke to them and made tiny coughing noises in their throats. You'd think they'd never been to Repentance, never worn a pair of shoes, before the authorities roped them in and dragged them to the classroom, wild-eyed and blubbering like calves.

The hippie kids were nothing like that. The complete opposite, in fact. They'd been everywhere, they'd seen everything, they were cocky and smart in class. *Knowing* was the word her Auntie Peg used, or *a bit too old in the head*, phrases followed by a slow compression of her mouth and chin. It was a distinction Joanne grappled with as she observed both types from behind the counter of her father's shop. Mrs Phelps, her history teacher, had summed it up for her one day, watching the O'Connor kids follow their dad out the door.

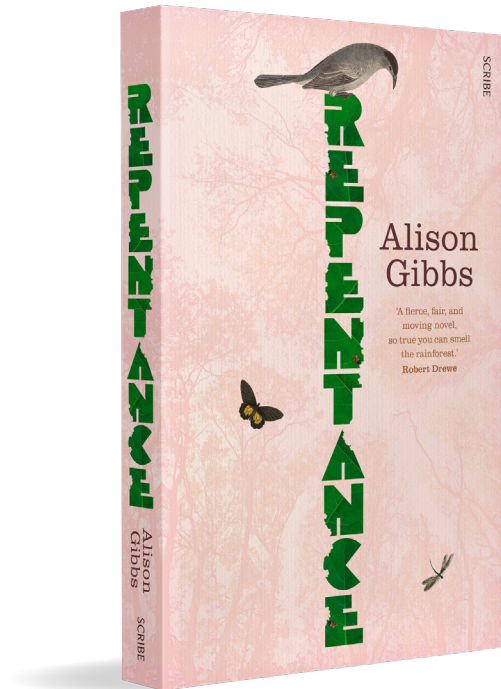
'In the end,' she told Joanne, 'it all boils down to choice. You can

## REPENTANCE

live with no electricity at the end of a rough dirt road. The difference lies in where you come from, not where you finish up.'

The air on that Tuesday afternoon was typically warm and still. The smoke from the mill's incinerator hung like a rag in the sky. Women sniffed at their sheets on the line and considered doing a rewash, and all over town people muttered about the need for rain.

Another timber truck rattled past. Joanne watched the heat resettle on the road like puddles of silver jelly. She squinted towards the forest, where thick clouds were often brewing by this time of the afternoon, but today there were none. There was nothing fresh about this spring. It felt tired and stale already. Biting down on her iceblock, she thought about her mother and felt a smarting ache behind the eyes.



**SCRIBE**  
Melbourne • London