

1993

## Golliwog Dreaming

Helen Gilbert

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

---

### Recommended Citation

Gilbert, Helen, Golliwog Dreaming, *Kunapipi*, 15(1), 1993.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol15/iss1/3>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

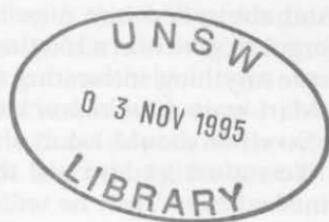
# Golliwog Dreaming

## **Abstract**

Once, a short time ago, in a land of fire and ash, there lived a man with his wife in a dusty farmhouse on the edge of a something you might have called a rolling hill, though it really wasn't much more than a hump in the pnd. For many years, they dreamed of sons to help tend the sheep but the sandman brought them a daughter instead. They named her Mari and the woman knitted a golliwog for the cradle because they were too poor to buy a doll. Before long, the baby grew into a little girl. She was plain and a bit tubby with freckles on her nose, but her parents agreed that she was really no trouble. When it became clear that she would be an only child, they accepted their fate and forgot their dreams, for they were simple people, hard-working, mostly honest, and only occasionally given to violence.

HELEN GILBERT

# Golliwog Dreaming



Once, a short time ago, in a land of fire and ash, there lived a man with his wife in a dusty farmhouse on the edge of a something you might have called a rolling hill, though it really wasn't much more than a hump in the ground. For many years, they dreamed of sons to help tend the sheep but the sandman brought them a daughter instead. They named her Mari and the woman knitted a golliwog for the cradle because they were too poor to buy a doll. Before long, the baby grew into a little girl. She was plain and a bit tubby with freckles on her nose, but her parents agreed that she was really no trouble. When it became clear that she would be an only child, they accepted their fate and forgot their dreams, for they were simple people, hard-working, mostly honest, and only occasionally given to violence.

From an early age, Mari learned to be quite average. She tolerated school, told only a few lies to her parents, and didn't back answer too often. During the week, her mother taught her how to cook and clean and knit, while on Sundays she went to church – or the wine shop – with her father. She had two or three unexceptional friends, a plaintive cat (who doesn't feature in this story), and no great future. We cannot say whether she was happy or not, but she didn't complain very much, except to the golliwog.

One day, when she was walking home from school through the bush, she tripped over a snake coiled in the sun beside an old black stump. It opened one lazy eye and told her to be less clumsy. Then, even though she'd done absolutely nothing to deserve it, the snake offered to grant her a wish.

Mari thought about this carefully before she replied.

'I want you to make my golliwog talk!' she said.

The snake looked grave, and then angry, and then sad. Finally it spoke. 'A long time ago,' it said, 'there was a skilful toymaker who created many different kinds of birds and animals. Whether plain or pearled they were all beautiful in their own ways, but the toymaker wasn't satisfied. She was lonely because she had no one to listen to her, so she decided to knit something in her own image. With her special bone needles and some black yarn, she began to work until a familiar shape grew. He had two legs, and two arms, a body and a head, just the same as she did. She spiked his hair, widened his smile and glassed over his eyes with buttons.

And she called him a golliwog, for the want of a better name. But she forgot to give him a tongue because it never occurred to her that he might have anything interesting to say.'

Mari waited for more, but the snake had clearly finished his tale.

'So what should I do?' she asked.

'You must let him go,' the snake replied, 'but first cut the thread that finished him. Then he will find his own tongue.'

'What if I make him one?' Mari persisted.

But the snake only flicked the fork of its own tongue at her, uncoiled itself, and slithered down a hole in the stump. Mari couldn't help noticing that its scales changed hue as it moved, like a rainbow dancing across the earth.

Disappointed and a little puzzled, but grateful nonetheless to escape without harm, Mari continued on her way. For many days, she thought about what the snake had said but it still didn't make sense to her way of thinking. When she sought the golliwog's advice, he only stared just the same as ever, so that didn't help much. Neither did her parents. Her mother thought she'd made it all up, and her father said snakes couldn't be trusted. She considered talking it over with God, but recalled that he didn't like snakes either so would doubtless be on her father's side, as usual. Eventually, because she loved the golliwog and couldn't bear to be without him, she did nothing.

A year passed, then two, and by and by Mari forgot about the snake. She grew a little fatter and the golliwog looked more tattered, but apart from that, things didn't change a great deal.

Then, when the third year was almost at its close, a strange thing happened. She was getting together a bag of old clothes for the rag and bone man when a small pink scrap of felt floated to the floor. A dark stain began to spread on the rug where it lay so Mari quickly snatched it up and threw it out the window. For some time afterwards, her fingers felt sticky and wet. That night, a strong wind blew the pink scrap back into the house and onto her pillow where the dark stain appeared once more. Mari tossed it in the fire and watched it sizzle for a while before it disappeared up the chimney in a puff of smoke. But the next morning, it reappeared on the breakfast table, this time parched and ashen. She would have buried it in the garden except a better idea suddenly struck her. Straight away, she fetched her golliwog, threaded a needle, and sewed the pink scrap on with neat, sharp stitches.

When the golliwog got his new tongue, however, the effect wasn't quite as Mari had hoped. He looked happy enough at first, but he still didn't talk. Then, after a few days, his smile turned into a grin, and the grin started to look more like a jeer, and the jeer became a snarl. His lips began to bulge, his mouth opened wider and deeper until it was like a huge, dark cavern, and out came big round globs that hovered in the air or burst into words Mari couldn't understand. The globs grew very large and the

words got louder and the room began to spin with the echo of laughter and fear, faster, and faster, and faster, until finally Mari could stand it no longer. She put a pillow over the golliwog's head and held it tight until the sounds faded to a whisper and then she locked him in an old chest with other toys she had long discarded. And there he stayed, all through the winter cold and the summer fires. Though Mari thought about him from time to time, she didn't dare let him out.

One afternoon, when the chill of autumn had just crept into the air, Mari went to play by the creek and met an old man there in a coat of many colours. He had black skin, no shoes, and a long grey beard. Mari asked him who he was and where he came from, but the old man merely nodded at her and didn't say a word.

The next day, and for many days afterwards, Mari found the old man always sitting in the same spot. Sometimes he smiled and other times he completely ignored her. She became convinced that he had a secret that she needed to know but she couldn't imagine what it might be.

'I'll tell you all my secrets if you just tell me one,' she pleaded with him, but still he remained silent. She told him some of her secrets anyway, because it seemed like a good idea and at least he wasn't likely to gossip. First the good ones, like what she kept in her treasure chest, and where the lambs' tails were put after branding. Then she told him the bad ones, the ones she wasn't supposed to know - why there were sometimes bruises on her mother's face, and what her uncle did to cousin Doreen in the shearing shed. But she didn't tell him about the golliwog.

The old man continued his silent vigil by the creek until Mari offered him another secret.

'I'll tell you where my father hides his plonk,' she said. Then she took the old man's hand and led him to a hollow surrounded by tussocks. She watched him uncork the cheap wine and drink it in silence. When he was finished, he smashed the bottle against a rock and walked away. As she gathered the broken glass to hide her betrayal, Mari held a fragment up to her eye and peered through it. From one side, everything looked like an old black and white photograph, but when she turned it round to look out from the inside, the black and white disappeared and she could see all the colours of the rainbow. Then she remembered what the snake had told her and began to understand why the old man had not spoken.

'I'll let my golliwog go,' she said to herself, 'and the old man will come back.'

Now the golliwog had been somewhat chastened by his months in the chest, and he never made a sound when Mari lifted up the lid. He even seemed to have his old smile back so she didn't find it too hard to love him once again and that made it harder to let him go. Because she couldn't quite bear to part with him completely, she found the end of the thread that had knitted him and spliced it to a very, very long piece of string which she tied to a tree in the yard.

'Now you can roam wherever you want,' she told him, 'and you won't get lost.' Then she threw the golliwog high into the air until he vanished.

That night she dreamed that the land unravelled itself, leaving bright trails of wool snaking over the countryside. The farmers of the district told their wives to take up their needles and knit or the sheep would suffocate from the weight of colour. *Knit one, slip one, knit one, pass the slipped stitch over, slip one, knit one, to the end.* The men brought out big knives and deftly severed the wool from the fleece while the women worked until their raw hands bled into the weave. Finally, they staunched the flow of thread and sat back to admire their handiwork. But nobody knew what they had knitted, and nobody wanted it. She woke to the taste of blood and lanolin in her mouth.

The old man never came back. We could assume he was killed that night in the town riots and so was unable to keep his bargain with a little white girl. Or we might suppose that he didn't really have a bargain to keep, since she altered the terms of the contract, and he never signed it in the first place anyway. But more than likely, the old man simply had better things to do.

Mari's story doesn't finish there, and nor does the golliwog's, but we'll come back to him shortly. When the townspeople had cleaned up the streets after the riots and the school re-opened with sheets of plastic over the broken windows, Mari took the piece of glass to the teacher and asked if she could tell everyone about the old man and the snake. But the teacher wasn't interested and the other children said that blackfellas had caused enough trouble for that week, and they taunted her until, in a fit of rage, she threw the magic glass against the brick wall where it shattered into a million pieces. Unknown to Mari, a tiny sliver lodged in her eye and thereafter her vision was occasionally coloured black and white. The doctors put it down to migraine and said she would grow out of it, but we can't know for sure if she did. We do know that she grew up in the usual way and finally left the school, and the town, and her parents in the dusty house, to become a nurse with the flying doctor service. Whether that had anything to do with the golliwog and the old man is a matter for speculation. Some say she always had a tender heart and a desire to help those less fortunate than herself. Others argue that she discovered the colour of money, but I prefer to think that a door opened and she simply walked through it. And if she kissed a snake out in the desert and found herself a prince, that's her business, or at least material for a different story.

As for the golliwog, he hadn't vanished in the usual way. Because he was smarter than Mari had credited, it didn't take him long to figure out how to detach himself from the string. He began by simply walking away. And as he journeyed far across the land, first one leg unravelled, then the next, then his stomach emptied its stuffing, and still he unwound himself

further and further until at last he had come to the beginning of the yarn that had made him what he was.

But that's still not the end of the golliwog's story. It isn't socially acceptable to see him on a child's bed these days, and you probably won't find his blueprint in the home journal, but if you've half an eye and can listen anytime – it doesn't have to be a dark and stormy night – you might hear his voice echo from the bottom of the toybox, or see the criss-cross of his tracks in your own backyard.

