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Azaria - a true history written and illustrated by Maree Coote.

This year is the 40th anniversary of the Azaria Chamberlain case and Maree Coote has produced a beautiful picture book which tells the sad story with heartfelt empathy. While the simple tale of the dingo taking the baby from the tent is the centre of the story, it develops into much, much more, like a Greek tragedy. The simple matter-of-fact style of storytelling harks back to traditional stories and cautionary tales.

The tone of the book is sombre and understated; the natural way of things is emphasised ".like most adventures, no one knows for sure how things will end". It captures the exotic lure of Uluru, the nature of the dingo and the frantic initial search for Azaria in the darkness. The Anangu trackers found some of the baby's clothes but the press raged. "Facts were forgotten as opinions multiplied, prejudice and gossip took hold, mistakes were made, lies were told, and millions of newspapers were sold." It took four inquests for the courts to declare that a dingo was responsible, but Lindy Chamberlain had spent long years in jail. The final lines - "Even the truth can seem to be lost sometimes... but, as we all know now, it's just waiting to be found." - are a lesson for us all.

Coote's illustrations are deceptively simple. Almost all the pages are dark, without the stark blue sky and searing sun we associate with the red centre. Many pages are red and it is only towards the end that we have white pages to celebrate the truth. While the reader will discern the influence of aboriginal-style art, it is not imitative. The baby is always white and innocent, the people with large searching eyes and the dingo ominously lurking.

This conflict between civilization and habitat and the lack of understanding of "otherness" will appeal to the sense of justice that children grasp so readily. While it is not a story for the very young, it will appeal to many readers, young and old, as do the dire traditional fairy tales.

—Carmel Ballinger for Magpies Magazine