

Praise for *Bone Talk* by Candy Gourlay

Shortlisted for the Costa Children's Book Award

Shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal

A United States Board on Books for Young People
Outstanding International Book

A *Washington Post* Best Children's Book

An *NBC News* Best Asian American
Children's/Young Adult Book

Endorsed by Amnesty International

'Shows us a moment of change, as two worlds meet,
and that it takes more than a ceremony to make a
man' *Sunday Times* Children's Book of the Week

'Very special' *The Times* Books of the Year

'One of the standout titles of the year' *Independent*

'Gourlay's evocative writing grips from the
outset' *Guardian* Books of the Month

'A master storyteller' *Scotsman*

'A mesmerising world of soulful ritual
and community' *Observer*

‘A soulful coming-of-age story rich in Filipino
myth and tradition’ *The Bookseller*

‘Gourlay paints an intricate backdrop steeped in mystical and
brutal imagery . . . A visceral coming-of-age novel’ *Kirkus*

‘Steeped in Filipino tradition . . .
richly historic’ *Publishers Weekly*

‘Whisks readers away into a fascinating,
unfamiliar world’ *International Youth Library*

‘Anyone wanting to indulge and learn from different
perspectives . . . might find the same reprieve I did
between these pages’ *International Examiner*

‘Utterly engrossing . . . sumptuously realised . . .
It will lodge deep in the bone long after these
pages have been turned’ Sita Brahmachari

‘A really thoughtful and wonderful piece
of storytelling’ Catherine Johnson

‘Totally transported to another time, another
word. Utterly amazing’ Emily Drabble

‘A wonderful novel . . . will stay with me
for a long time’ Elizabeth Laird

‘A good coming-of-age story transcends worlds and timelines,
and such is the case for *Bone Talk*’ Erin Entrada Kelly

**WILD
SONG**

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Shine

Bone Talk

For younger readers

Mike Falls Up

Is it a Mermaid?

Non-fiction

First Names: Ferdinand (Magellan)

WILD SONG

CANDY GOURLAY



David Fickling Books

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Oxford OX1 2NP, UK

Wild Song
is a
DAVID FICKLING BOOK

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by
David Fickling Books,
31 Beaumont Street,
Oxford, OX1 2NP

Text © Candy Gourlay, 2023

Cover by Leo Nickolls

978-1-78845-207-6

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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DAVID FICKLING BOOKS Reg. No. 8340307

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11/16½ pt Baskerville by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays, Ltd., Elcograf, S.p.A.

In memory of two women I love very much

Cynthia Lopez Quimpo

My fierce, beloved Mom who could light up any room

18 December 1936–4 April 2021

And

Susan Quimpo

Wondrous truth-teller, cousin, forever friend

6 February 1961–14 July 2020

In 1904, more than a thousand people from the Philippines travelled to the United States to take part in the World's Fair in the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, also known as the Saint Louis World's Fair. Among them were indigenous people called Igorots.

Part One

1

Hunting

The tree was singing.

No it's not, Samkad would have said. But he wasn't here yet and anyway, what did he know about anything?

I pressed my cheek against the bark to feel the tree's voice rumble in my blood, rough and low and shapeless, unlike American music with its pom pom pom. *I like your song*, I whispered to the tree. *It calls my spirit*.

Which was a good thing, Mother, because I'd been sitting on that branch for hours, and I could barely keep my eyes open. The boar I'd been hunting for days was nowhere to be seen.

My right leg had gone to sleep and, when I straightened it, my knee made a cracking noise, sudden and deafening as an American gunshot. Which was unnerving in the moss-muffled silence of the forest.

Eheh, you've been dead a whole year, Mother, but I still glanced down nervously, half-expecting to see you in the clearing below, fists planted in your waist, ordering me down from the tree like you'd done countless times before, bombarding me with questions. How had I acquired that breechcloth I was wearing? What had I done to my skirt? What if the Americans had caught me? Didn't they forbid hunting in the dark?

The stillness was suddenly split by a violent screeching of monkeys in the next tree. What had set them off? I searched the gloom carefully. But there was nothing there.

During the war, a lowland soldier had tried to hide in the mossy forest, but the Americans were not far behind and he was soon captured. When the war was over, American patrols trawled through the forest, making a mess, hacking trees and shooting everything in sight. But now the patrols were gone and the forest was quiet again. The Americans had finished their warring and turned their attention to ruling us. So many new laws! *Ancients must listen. Women must wear blouses. Children must go to American school.*

But no, Mother, as far as I was aware, hunting in the dark was still allowed. And nobody, not the Americans, nor the ancients, needed to know whether I did so wearing a skirt or a breechcloth.

Up the sun rose. The sky bloomed pink. The tops of the trees turned gold. A thick, white mist boiled up on the forest floor. And the boar came.

It was a great black lump, gliding through the mist. Squealing softly, it began to root between the tree's toes, tail flicking its great, meaty flanks. Mother, it was even bigger than the last one I killed.

Crunch.

The boar's head jerked up, ears pricked.

Was that a human-shaped shadow, Mother? There, by that bush? The boar turned and stared.

Then, from the opposite direction, running feet. And barking.

'Little Luki?' Samkad, the idiot, burst into the clearing. His dog, Chuka, yapped from somewhere behind him.

The boar spun to face Samkad. It lowered its head to attack.

I leaped, landing between the boar and my friend so hard my teeth rattled in my skull.

The boar launched itself, and I found myself on my back, its weight pinning me down, its head turning right and left, its tusks within gouging distance of my eyes, the hot, stinky breath washing over my face, its hairy hide coarse and wiry against my skin, the hooves scrabbling painfully on my waist.

My spear was buried deep in its throat. The boar glared at me, its eyes sparking with anger and fear. I pushed the spear deeper. It grunted. The eyes began to glaze, and the hot, hairy body slumped against me. I wrenched myself from under it, backing away as the creature fell onto its side. Its feet began to run, as if it was racing from its own death. I watched the hooves kick and kick and kick, and then stop as its

spirit drained from its body. The boar's soul was running in the invisible world of the dead now. And its flesh had become meat.

I turned to check on Samkad, and Chuka the dog promptly stopped her yapping to throw herself in front of him, in case I tried to kiss him or something. Mother, I swear it's embarrassing to have a dog for a love rival.

Samkad was fine, of course, gazing at me with wide-eyed admiration as Chuka danced about as if to say, 'Me! Me! It's me you should look at!'

'Do you need me to finish it off?' Samkad asked.

But I hushed him. That rustling again. 'Who's there?' I yelled, scooping up a rock and throwing it into the bushes.

'What is it?' I could feel the heat of Samkad at my back.

'Shh! Just before I jumped down, I saw someone.' If it was someone from the village, they would be rushing to report me to the ancients, I thought.

'Where?'

'Over there,' I said. But there was nothing there; no foot-steps, no trampled grass, no broken twigs. Had I imagined it?

'Maybe it was not a someone, but a *something*?' Samkad said.

Yes. Maybe it was just a monkey, casting a large shadow.

Mother, don't you dead people see everything? Was it a person? Shake a tree branch for yes, toss a pebble for no!

Samkad turned to the boar. He'd already forgotten about it. Kneeling, he laid a hand on its head. 'Thank you, beast,' he whispered. 'May you live contentedly in the invisible world.'

Then he got back to his feet and wrapped his arms around me. He smelled of damp soil and wet fern. His mouth, pressed against my forehead, was soft, like fruit. ‘It looks like I got here just in time.’

I snorted. ‘Just in time. You were lucky it didn’t gore you!’

‘It was not luck, it was you! You were magnificent.’ Samkad nuzzled my hair. ‘That boar – it’s twice the size of the other two. You did well.’

‘That’s not what *they’re* going to say.’

‘No,’ Sam said. ‘There will be no thanks from all the hungry folk who are going to share this boar.’

He pressed his lips against mine and all the ungrateful people of Bontok melted away in a rush of sudden heat, as if we’d both tumbled from the cold outdoors into a warm, dry hut.

Mother, it must amuse you to see us like this when just five years ago, we were scrawny best friends with scabbed knees, brawling in the dirt when we weren’t traipsing up and down the hills, pushing each other into rice paddies. But now we were both sixteen and everything had changed.

Later, when I had washed in a nearby stream and swapped my hunting breechcloth for a fresh skirt and blouse, Samkad tied the boar to a strong bamboo pole. We each shouldered one end, Samkad in front, me at the back. The boar swung easily between us as we walked out of the forest and up the steep, green slope towards the village.

Samkad grinned over his shoulder. ‘What shall we tell the ancients this time?’

‘All the excruciating details.’ I laughed. ‘How you waited in the tree. How you leaped in front of the boar. How you speared the boar, just so.’

Sam hooted with laughter.

And when we got there, that was exactly what we told them. How Samkad had waited in the tree. How he leaped in front of the boar. How he speared the boar, just so. And the ancients – gazing up at Sam’s amiable smile, those honest brown eyes, those broad shoulders, that deep chest etched with tattoos that marked him out as a brave man – believed everything he said.

2

Deception

Sometimes, I think about all the times you had to face the wrath of the ancients over me, Mother. Luki's been wearing a breechcloth again, Chochon! Chochon, your daughter was fighting with a boy! Chochon, the girl was playing with a spear when she should have been pounding rice with the other girls!

You stood there, listening calmly, and when we went home, it was your turn to do the scolding. You talked about duty, you talked about manners, you talked about modesty. But after a time, I saw that you were only scolding because that was what the ancients expected of you. You put your fury on like a hat and then, just as quickly, took it off.

Even so, the ancients filled me with rage. Look at these tattoos on my face, Mother, look at these tattoos on my shoulders! All those years ago, the ancients rewarded me with tattoos and called me brave when I raised the alert that our blood enemy

the Mangili was about to attack. But in the same breath they forbade my carrying a spear and prohibited my hunting.

‘Luki,’ you told me patiently. ‘The ancients esteem women. We bear children. We plant the rice, we cultivate the soil. We nourish the village. We are the future.’

‘So why can’t I hunt?’ I complained.

‘Because women don’t hunt,’ you said. ‘We never have. Not since before we began to remember.’

That’s what you said, Mother. But you didn’t sound convinced.

I tried to be good. I tried to be like all the other women. I followed the new American rules. I wore a blouse. I did my chores. I learned how to speak American at Mister William’s little school. I kept out of trouble. Apart from hunting.

Now the Americans are emptying the forests so quickly with their guns, we need all the meat we can get. And, Mother, you have to admit, my arrangement with Samkad is perfect.

Samkad was playing his part well. The ancients couldn’t look away from those flexing biceps and that boyish smile. As Samkad began to talk, you could see them relax, settling down on their haunches in front of the Council House fire, the wrinkles hanging looser from their foreheads, their faces spreading wide in toothless smiles. They began to thank the spirits of our ancestors for the boar – *my* boar. A crowd began to gather and I pushed my way to the back, my empty belly growling mercilessly to the chanting of the ancients.

I felt an elbow in my side. A spiteful voice hissed into my ear.

‘*Pssst!* What are you so pleased about, Luki?’

My belly clenched with annoyance. It was Tilin, Bontok’s meanest girl, who slept on the pallet next to mine in the House for Women. You’d think the ten of us unmarried girls would be friends, sleeping side by side on our narrow pallets, heads to the wall, feet pointing towards the warm fire in the cooking room next door. Well, I guess they tolerated me when you were still alive, Mother. They liked *you*. *You* were easy, *you* made people smile. But I am not like you, am I, Mother?

Tilin glared at me. Looking at her, it baffled me that young men were constantly hanging around the House for Women, waiting for a glimpse of those dark butterfly eyebrows and that too-wide mouth that made her look like she was smiling even when she was smirking. Which was what she was doing now.

‘Well?’

I sighed. Obviously, in my rush to go hunting I must have forgotten some important chore.

Tilin snorted. ‘Guess who had to trample manure this morning because you weren’t there?’

‘Oh!’ I clapped a hand over my mouth. I’d completely forgotten that it was my turn. I turned to face her and the sun struck my eyes like a blow. ‘I . . . I was helping Samkad!’

‘Samkad, Samkad, SAMKAD!’ Tilin was practically spitting in my ear. ‘Why does he always need YOU to help him? What does Samkad see in you?’

Samkad loves me, I thought. And it was not Samkad who needed me. *I* needed him. I could not hunt without Samkad.

I scowled at Tilin. There was a flower in her hair, and a neat string of seashells from far away held her long hair away from her face. Her blouse looked crisp and white and her small feet were not blackened with forest mud like mine. Even so, she didn't look very strong. *I could fight you*, I thought. *I could rub your pretty face in the dirt.*

But then a small voice murmured at my knee. 'Tilin, I'm bored.' It was Sidong, Tilin's little sister. 'Where is my book? I want to draw.'

Instantly, Tilin was on her knees with her arms around Sidong. 'You can't draw now, little chick,' Tilin murmured. 'The ancients are not finished.'

Looking at the two of them, I felt rotten for thinking horrible thoughts. Maybe *I* was the meanest girl in Bontok.

While Tilin busied herself with Sidong, Kakot, who slept on the pallet on my other side, took over. 'And where were you last night, when the rice needed to be put on the boil?'

'Probably with Samkad,' someone murmured behind me. 'She's never there when there are chores to be done.'

The others joined in.

'Never there when babies need to be carried.'

'Never there when rice needs husking.'

'Luki's no help!'

'Luki's no use!'

They hawked my name like gobs of spit. *Luki! Luki! Luki!*

'Luki.' We all turned. 'Let's go.' Samkad was standing right next to us. When did the chanting end? And did he hear

them chastising me? His face was smooth, it gave nothing away.

‘Come on, Luki, help me carry the boar to Father’s house so that I can butcher it,’ he said.

Mother, the other girls were smiling at him. Smiling! Right in the middle of their nastiness! I rolled my eyes at Samkad, but he was too busy showing the girls his straight white teeth to notice.

‘Congratulations,’ Tilin simpered, stretching her chin out, clearly trying to make her neck look longer. ‘Another boar! What a skilful hunter you are, Samkad!’

If it hadn’t been for Sidong, I would have scooped up a handful of mud and smeared it on her silly neck.

Samkad led me to the boar and we lifted it up on his signal. The boar was heavier now that it was weighed down with the ancients’ good wishes. We carried it out of the courtyard, Chuka leading the way to the hut that once belonged to Samkad’s dead father. Although he lived in the House for Men with the other unmarried men, Samkad had continued to tend his father’s house. After you died, Mother, was where Samkad and I had cooked and shared many meals, and it was where we always butchered the meat from our hunts. Someday, in the far away future, when we’re ready to marry, we can make our home in it.

We had barely left the Council House when Samkad signalled me to stop and lower the boar to the ground.

‘What?’ I said.

He folded his arms across his chest. 'You've got to try harder, Luki.' His voice was gentle but chiding.

I flattened my face and hid all my feelings. 'Don't know what you mean.'

'They are your friends.'

I scowled. 'HAH! They were never my friends.'

'Give them a chance.'

'A chance to annoy me?'

'No, a chance to know you.'

'They have known me since we were children. They can't stand me.'

'They like you really, Luki.'

'They liked my mother. Me? They don't want to know.'

'That's not true,' Sam said quietly. 'It is you who reject them.'

Didn't he get it? The more time I spent with the other girls, the less they liked me. And what if they found out about my hunting expeditions? They would probably rather I became an expert manure trampler than a hunter.

Mother, that was when it occurred to me that this was all *your* fault. It was you who thought it amusing to dress me in a breechcloth because I liked playing with boys. It had pleased you when I learned to throw Father's spear and you had shown me how to practise with a target. It was you who made me different. And now you've gone to the invisible world, Mother, and left me to face the consequences.

Sam continued to give me advice. 'Make light of things!'

Have a laugh with them! Then they won't be so hard on you. Smile!

Smile! It made me scowl so hard I could feel the strain on my ears. He was a man, he was allowed to fight, to choose his wife, to hunt. He had no idea what it was like to want something you couldn't have.

Just then, I heard a voice murmuring by my right hip. I didn't catch it all, just *Luki-something-something-Samkad*. All this time, some idiot had been listening.

I spun around.

'I DARE YOU TO SAY THAT TO MY FACE!'

Oh, Mother. Why didn't you teach me more self-control? It was Sidong, chasing after us with a ledger from the American school under one arm.

She stared up at me, her mouth open, tears trembling on her brown cheeks.

Samkad was suddenly beside her, smiling. 'Of course you can, Sidong. We don't mind, do we, Little Luki?'

'Mind what?' I muttered.

'She asked if she could come along. She wants to watch us prepare the boar.'

Guilt swelled into a lump in my throat. 'Sure,' I mumbled. 'Come along, Sidong.'

My voice must have sounded normal and maybe I even managed a smile, because the little girl's face brightened immediately. She gathered up her ledger and followed us as if I hadn't just screamed tears into her eyes.