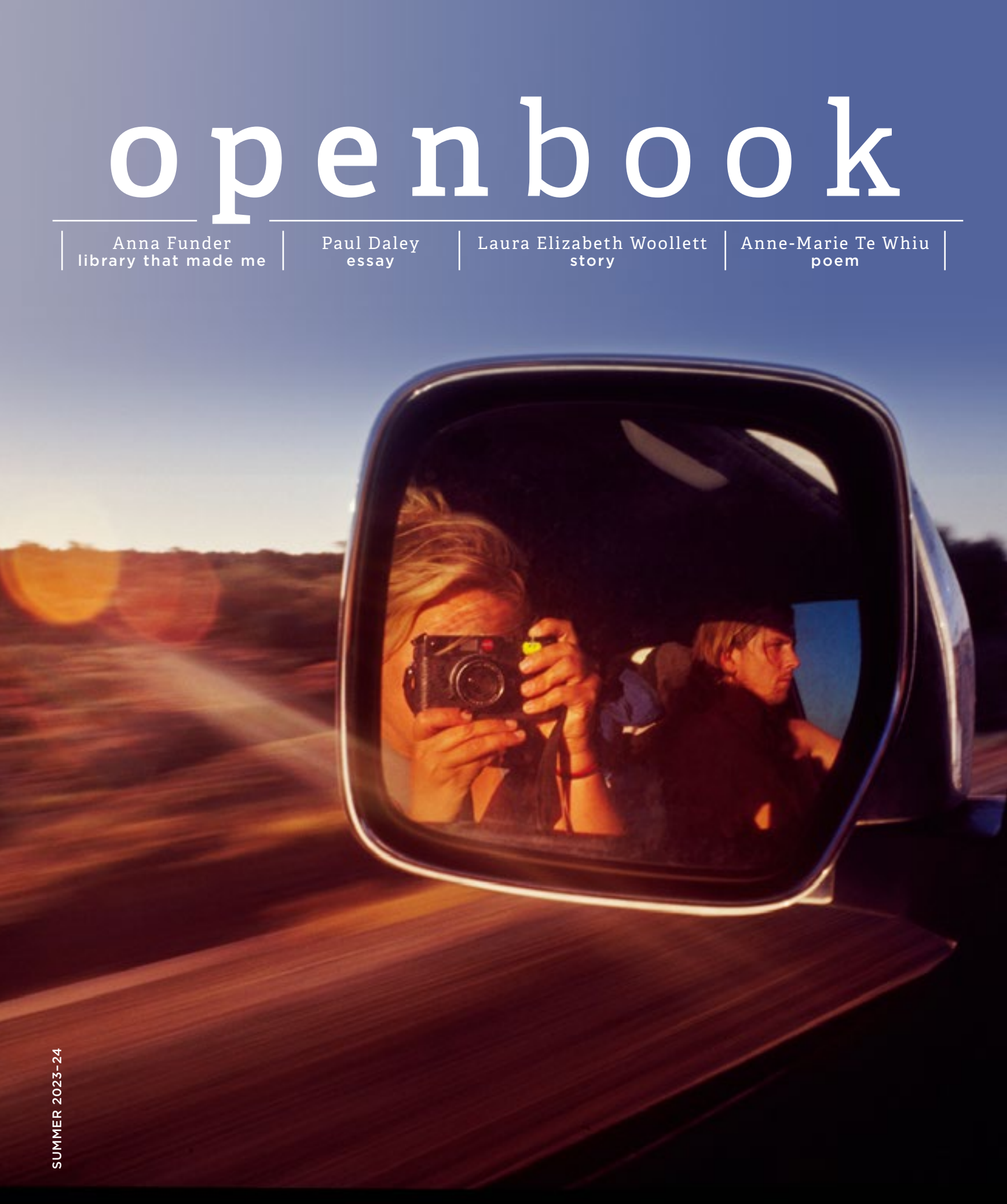
# openbook

Anna Funder
library that made me

Paul Daley
essay

Laura Elizabeth Woollett
story

Anne-Marie Te Whiu
poem



SUMMER 2023–24


Sydney WorldPride Bridge Walk, 5 March 2023. Photo by Pip Farquharson


On Door

*Openbook* is designed and printed on the traditional and ancestral lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. The State Library of NSW offers our respect to Aboriginal Elders past and present, and extends that respect to other First Nations people. We celebrate the strength and diversity of NSW Aboriginal cultures, languages and stories.

*Scorpis caruleus*, a blue or violet sweep, from *Natural History Drawings of Australia*, 1839–1841, by James Stuart

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Illustration by Rosie Handley

# What have you got?

Calling cards, hand-delivered invitations, calendar invites, Facebook events and RSVPs are all part of the changing lexicon of social functions of all kinds. In most cases, the host of the party has a rough idea of who is coming. But when a large cultural institution hosts an Open Day, everyone is invited — every resident and visitor to NSW.

At the Library's Open Day on 29 October, many, many invitees came along for a celebratory day of talks, screenings, tours and an opportunity to roam. Visitors were young — quite a few future patrons are still in their prams — and old, from near and far. There were regular visitors and others who confessed they hadn't stepped across the Library's threshold for decades. Some arrived with purpose, programs in hand, keen to catch a curator talk, visit the new Photography Gallery or take their kids to see a Real Pigeons Live Mystery. Others walked in hesitantly, somewhat overwhelmed by everything on offer. One visitor from Virginia, USA, came up to me and got straight to the point, asking, 'What have you got?' Where to begin!

I gave him a quick precis of what was on offer. But I could have talked about the activities and talks on here nearly every day of the year, not to mention a collection that will be on offer for the rest of his life. And beyond. Later, it struck me that *Openbook* is one way of answering that tourist's valid question. It exists to answer that question, 'What have you got?'.

The magazine's response comes in many forms — glorious photography, new fiction, author profiles, collection spotlights and substantial essays. In this issue, writer and journalist Paul Daley looks at authors whose beloved works don't fit so well with modern values. Poet and HSC English specialist Felicity Plunkett explores how the HSC English Extension 2 course has changed lives. Curators write about LGBTQI+ oral histories and, this being summer, curator Geoff Barker writes about ice skating. Head of digitisation Scott Wajon lifts his pastry skills, courtesy of one of the original celebrity chefs, The Galloping Gourmet. In a nod to the festive season, our poem by Anne-Marie Te Whiu has a school nativity play theme.

Melissa Lucashenko, one of Australia's great writers, has a new book out called *Edenglassie* and is profiled here by Jasmin McGaughey. Another superb writer, Anna Funder, has written what may be the most romantic 'Library that made me' that we've ever had.

We're not ignoring summer, so you'll find glorious photos of fishing from some of Australia's leading photographers. The work of one of them, Narelle Autio, with its wonderful road trip vibe, also graces the front cover. We're thrilled to have her.

Some Open Day visitors might have watched the live ABC Radio Sydney interview with outgoing State Librarian Dr John Vallance and his successor Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon from the Macquarie Street forecourt. Many more will have listened on the radio. Whether you were one of them or not, you can learn more about CBB's background and vision for the Library in her first *Openbook* interview.

We welcome her to the Library and thank all our readers for their support during the year. And hope for a more peaceful 2024.

**Phillipa McGuinness**
**Editor, *Openbook***

**Quiz answers page 90** **1.** Facebook **2.** Agatha Christie **3.** The first Winter Olympics, at Chamonix **4.** *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* **5.** Torus **6.** Algeria **7.** Music in film or television that is part of the story and can be heard by the characters **8.** Brown's River, Kingston, south of Hobart in the 1840s, by Joseph and Annie Keen **9.** Donna Summer **10.** Anna Clark **11.** Rock characteristics and classification **12.** Hitchcock's *Vertigo* in 1958 **13.** Pro Hart **14.** 1928, in *Steamboat Willie* **15.** Limberlost is the name of the family orchard in Arnott's book, named after an American novel, *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909) by Gene Porter-Stratton. **16.** Jupiter has at least 67 known moons including Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto. **17.** Damien Parer **18.** Quercus is the Latin genus name of the oak **19.** St Stephen's Uniting Church **20.** Graham Kerr


Artwork on Oxford Street hoardings by Amy Blue. Photo by Katherine Griffiths

## Darling it hurts

Neighbourhoods form their own worlds within much bigger ones. Darlinghurst, in inner Sydney, has always been more like another country altogether, maybe another planet. How is it possible for one neighbourhood to contain so many layers — grimy, sequinned, joyful and even revolutionary. What's more, Darlinghurst is a cultural, educational, religious and medical hub. Struggles for gay acceptance, law reform and health justice for people with HIV/AIDS have played out on Darlinghurst streets, changing the whole country in the process.

Once notorious for vice — razor gangs, illegal gambling, sex work and drugs — the neighbourhood's former on-site prison, the Darlinghurst Gaol, is now the National Art School. Darlinghurst Courthouse still functions, as does the stalwart Courthouse Hotel diagonally opposite.

*My Darlinghurst*, published by NewSouth, is a new book of specially commissioned text and photographs — many drawn from the Library's collection — edited by Anna Clark, Gabrielle Kemmis and Tamson Pietsch. It contains engrossing essays from historians, activists and residents. Learning about the past of a familiar place makes it possible for the reader to walk its streets with new eyes, one of the joys of local history.

Oxford Street, once a Gadigal path from Darlinghurst to the coast, may be a major traffic thoroughfare but it is also a global symbol of gay liberation and good times. Currently undergoing urban renewal, the City of Sydney commissioned artwork about the queer history of the street for Sydney WorldPride 2023.

The panels still festoon whole blocks, their pink hues and playful style displaying a history of the community that is sometimes much darker and at times wicked, but always exuberant.

# Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon

## Incoming State Librarian Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon spent time in the Mitchell Librarian's old office chatting with *Openbook* editor Phillipa McGuinness about her new role.

**IT SEEMS APPROPRIATE TO START BY ASKING THE NEW STATE LIBRARIAN WHAT SHE ENJOYS READING.**

I read a combination of different things. I've been reading an interesting collection of short essays and pieces by Charmian Clift. I really like non-fiction. I love reading books on architecture, design and urban history. The two I've got at the moment are *The Women Who Changed Architecture* (Princeton Architectural Press) that a friend gave me from her overseas travels. And then a book on sea pools around the world that somebody I follow on Instagram contributed to.

I like reading fiction too, but I'm quite particular. My son gave me Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*, which I'd read many years ago. I just finished that on holidays — I enjoy rereading.

I really like biographies and autobiographies too, because I find that after a long day in the office they're so relaxing. I've just finished Sam Neill's memoir — that was great. My husband, a historian and curator, buys me lots of books, usually things I would never select for myself. So, between him and my 23-year-old son, they keep me in books.

**WERE LIBRARIES, BOOKS AND READING PART OF YOUR CHILDHOOD?**

I grew up in Adelaide but both parents were from elsewhere. Dad was an architect by training. In the early 1960s cities were burgeoning and the need for architects was great so they had the choice of Canada, Brazil and Australia. It was back when your passage from the UK was paid for by the Australian Government.

Dad had served during World War Two in Ceylon — now Sri Lanka — in the Royal Engineers of the British Army. So he had this love for the tropics and warmer climates. He met my mother in Cape Town. They had three children there, one child in England, and my mother decided she didn't want to dress four boys under five, on a daily basis, in a cold climate. I'm not quite sure how they ended up in Adelaide. They had three more children there, including me, the baby of the family.

We grew up in a world where books, ideas, language, research and art were big themes. I probably didn't go as willingly to places like museums some of the time — I was an outdoor child and sport was my main focus. But we were taken to these places and books were a huge part of our upbringing.

**WHAT WAS YOUR LOCAL LIBRARY GROWING UP IN ADELAIDE?**

Walkerville Library. It's a very beautiful library, so inviting and colourful. I still remember that they redesigned it and put in this incredible sunken area for kids with cushions where you could sit and read — very 1970s. I haven't been there for a long time. I thought it was magical. I remember the school librarians being so encouraging of individual research projects, which I loved. Like my mother, who was always incredibly encouraging of people reading.

**TELL ME ABOUT HER.**

My mother was a huge reader — three books a week — a very literary person. I spent my childhood listening to her talking about things — she'd go to a monthly Patrick White reading group, for example.

She ran book clubs and all sorts of things as an English teacher. She had this gift for finding the children who probably didn't have many books at home, particularly those on the bright side and the children with English as a second language. I still get messages from the children whose lives she transformed through books. It moves me every time.

My dad was an artist as well as an architect. He made the most exquisite woodblock prints of Italian cities.

When I got this new job, my siblings reached out and said our mum would be the most proud, because books were her life. She always said if you have books, you have a good life. We were the lucky ones with these two guiding lights.

**SCHOOL MUST HAVE PLAYED A ROLE TOO.**

The school library I loved passionately. I loved the people who worked there. All that access to knowledge — the full set of the World Book encyclopedias, the kind of thing that my parents would never have bought.

I did art in my final year of school. It was my favourite subject. I did an in-depth study of illuminated manuscripts. I'm not really sure why! I went to the State Library of South Australia, the modern building next to the Mortlock Wing. They brought out these incredibly valuable, beautiful manuscripts so I could see them. I remember thinking at the time how extraordinary the librarian was showing them to me, a 16-year-old, who knew nothing about the topic other than liking the look of them!

Caroline Butler-Bowdon in the new Photography Gallery. Photo by Joy Lai

**LIBRARIES AS BUILDINGS CAN BE QUITE EXTRAORDINARY.**

I think they influenced my love of architecture and design. Libraries are a very important typology in architecture. We're sitting in the most extraordinary room right now with craftsmanship and timberwork, stained glass windows and so forth. They're places that make your heart sing, lift your spirit. It's that extraordinary feeling of crossing the threshold and being somewhere special.

That's what this place has always been for me. I remember visiting here when I was around 20 and first arrived in Sydney. I thought it was incredibly grand, but open to all. I could visit any day of the week. I could come and study here. I could come and see exhibitions. I could meet people here. It planted that whole idea of libraries being at the heart of society.

**DOES YOUR NEW ROLE AS STATE LIBRARIAN FOLLOW ON FROM THE WORK AROUND PUBLIC SPACE THAT YOU'VE BEEN DOING IN THE DEPARTMENTS OF PLANNING AND TRANSPORT?**

The work that I have been doing has been in public spaces and in parks and streets and centres but yes, I think it's fully connected. It's about how you create different experiences in those places — quiet experiences as well as noisy, fun, activated experiences and everything in between where people can learn something new about their city.

Libraries, in my mind, are like parks. The absolute bedrock of cities and places. The best democracies in the world have great libraries. Libraries are all about place, thinking, belonging, connection. Obviously learning and research as well. They can transform people's lives.

**DO PEOPLE APPRECIATE THEIR TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE?**

The profile and potential of libraries has soared. They are becoming increasingly valued and innovative as cultural and public spaces. We've seen that around the globe. COVID underscored their value even more, if we'd ever doubted it. People are craving social exchange but, critically, they're craving places that are different. Places that are distinctive, have meaning and that successfully cross time.

**EXHIBITIONS ARE ABLE TO DO THAT, AREN'T THEY?**

We've just been in the *Shot* exhibition in the new Photography Gallery. There are three centuries of photographs in that space; 400 photos that make a cross-section of extraordinary periods in history. But the Library itself does that too, with its different parts built at different times.

The most extraordinary new auditorium in Sydney just opened here at the Library. Beautiful acoustics, beautiful

atmosphere. It will become a stage for all the wonderful things that can happen here, events that can spark imagination and stretch people's understanding of their place in the world.

First Nations stories are *so* important here. The incredible exhibition that's on at the moment of Aboriginal objects from coastal Sydney that have been held in overseas museums. That helps people to understand 60,000 years of history and continuing, living cultures.

Libraries offer an open invitation for minds, but also for hearts. How do you connect? At the heart of that is reading, writing, stories.

**THE STATE LIBRARY OF NSW IS SITUATED IN A SIGNIFICANT CULTURAL PRECINCT. WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DOES THAT OFFER?**

I really look forward to connecting in with all the other institutions around the Library. You know, we have an incredible group of cultural institutions and all their collections and experiences. We're of course surrounded by the Domain, the Botanic Gardens — we've got the best of indoor and outdoor. The collections here draw out all the stories of the places within walking distance of the Library and, indeed, across the state. That excites me.

I think there's great opportunity to improve the walkability in and around this area. It's a way of connecting to stories. What are the stories between here and the Botanic Gardens, and the other institutions? What are the threads of collection that led to some of the great streets of the city and indeed the whole state?

I've been doing quite a lot of that work in transport and planning. Beginning to tell that story of people understanding their city or place through walking it.

Also, I was on the Macquarie Street Steering Committee, through my leadership of the Premier's Priority dedicated to public space. I learned a lot from the other institutions along this great street.

**AND THE LIBRARY SITS AT THE TOP OF AN INCREDIBLE NETWORK OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES ACROSS THE STATE.**

Part of my recent work has been collaborating with the majority of the councils across NSW on different sorts of funding programs. They all have libraries and I cannot wait to go and explore more of them.

Librarians and staff are there daily for their local communities. They're places to read, places for events, places for connection. Every single library will have a bounty of stories that show off the difference that library makes in that community, just as this place that we're sitting in does.

How can we draw that story of impact and value out? We do that with numbers, that's important. But also with stories. If one experience in a library changes the way somebody sees something, or a connection with one librarian encourages somebody to explore something new or think about something differently, that's something to celebrate. I think that's happening day in, day out across the whole library network.

**THE SANDSTONE MITCHELL LIBRARY CAN BE INTIMIDATING. HOW DO WE BRING MORE PEOPLE HERE, OR TAKE THE LIBRARY TO THEM?**

Yes, how do we connect with people who might not feel welcome here, who might never have visited or who might not know what's here for them? It starts with the offer, the program and our essential services. Obviously, the whole digital program is of massive importance. If there's a reason to visit somewhere, people will come in large numbers. We've seen that here. The incredible combination of this storied institution with all its contemporary relevance plus these new facilities becomes one whole experience.

It comes down to continuing to integrate the different parts of the Library to create a whole experience — encouraging a researcher to see an exhibition, tempting a child who visited for school to bring their parents back at the weekend, someone who works on Macquarie Street who is so inspired by the collections they visit a regional city and so on.

We see incredible programming here already. Everything that I'm thinking about builds on the exhibition and events program that's already in place. Things like *Openbook*. Growing the education program. Connection with the public library network. Capacity building.

When I did my Churchill Fellowship in 2018. I spent time at the Louisiana Museum of Art, about 20 minutes from Copenhagen, Denmark. The head curator there spoke to me about the 'sauna' principle. It's about 'hot' and 'cold' programming. You will always do things that are popular — the 'hot' offer. But then the 'cold' or the cool might be harder, niche programming for different sorts of audiences. It has to be a combination of different layers of programming.

The scale and depth of the collections here are staggering. The Library's continuous research program is at the core of the institution.

**ARE PARTNERSHIPS PART OF THIS?**

At the heart of this are proper partnerships that, firstly, match and, secondly, grow the core purpose of the institution. That's what really interests me. Partnerships that draw on the deep expertise and the collections across the Library. I see incredible opportunity. It's the type of work that I've been doing for the past 15 to 20 years.

I'm thinking too of how we work with schools. I'm passionate about schools. I sit on a school board, I'm the daughter of an English teacher. It's deeply ingrained in me. The strength of the education program is at the heart of what we do.

Some schools will always visit. But how do we get to the schools — those in the city, regional NSW and beyond — that might not otherwise ever think of visiting in real life or connect with digital programs? I want every child, every citizen to have access to a library, like I was able to experience as a child. I'm thinking about how we might work towards that bigger invitation for communities who might otherwise not visit.

**WHAT ABOUT THE LIBRARY'S GLOBAL STATURE?**

The collections here have global influence. One of the roles I had when I was at Historic Houses Trust/Sydney Living Museums (now Museums of History NSW) was managing the exhibitions program, including the touring exhibitions program. We toured things across the world and fully across Australia. I'm passionate about that.

**YOU SEEM TO ALREADY KNOW LOTS OF PEOPLE WHO WORK HERE!**

I actually know quite a few of the staff through having worked on my PhD here, which was about urban history, specifically the history of apartment living in Sydney.

Some of my happiest hours during my PhD were spent poring over diaries, drawings and sketches in the architectural collection here among the incredible two million images and photographs in the collection.

I also met lots of people here through exhibitions I curated. For *Painting the Rocks* and *Sydney by Tram,* for example, I drew on the Library's collections and on the expertise of curatorial and collections management staff.

**I'M GUESSING YOU MIGHT BE THE FIRST STATE LIBRARIAN WHO HAS ALSO JUDGED THE PREMIER'S LITERARY PRIZES, WHICH ARE RUN BY THE LIBRARY.**

Yes, I was on the panel for the NSW Premier's History Prizes for a few years. I was lucky enough to get those huge boxes of books arriving on my doorstep. I spent my weekends thinking that the practice of writing history, particularly Australian history, was — and is — alive and well.

**WE'RE TALKING A FEW WEEKS BEFORE YOUR OFFICIAL START DATE. WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO?**

Meeting the staff! I want to meet the donors and the volunteers who give so generously to the Library. It's the building, it's the collection, it's the place but, really, it's the people who work here, who love this institution, that bring all that to life for the public.

**HAVE YOU BEEN DOWN INTO THE STACKS?**

Yes, I have. When I was a curator I used to come here quite often to look at collection items. Interestingly, I brought my son a few weeks ago to the Shakespeare exhibition. He's an English literature Shakespeare obsessive. Even though he spends time at the State Library of Victoria he couldn't believe the collection items here, including the First Folio. We were wandering around and bumped into a curator who I know who took us down into the stacks.

But clearly, I'm a novice. I reckon you could work here for years and years and still find different parts of the place. I used to find that at Historic Houses Trust. I knew the places and the properties well but in some ways you never touch the surface.

**I'VE WORKED HERE FOR TWO YEARS AND I STILL GET LOST.**

I'm sure I will. Hopefully people will recognise me and help. 'There she is, the State Librarian. She needs a hand!'

## Libraries offer an open invitation for minds, but also for hearts.

**WHEN YOU DO GET YOUR FEET UNDER THE STATE LIBRARIAN'S DESK, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO PUT ON THE WALL OR ON THE SHELVES?**

A combination of contemporary and historical, probably quite eclectic things. People always think about the 2-D paintings, manuscripts and so forth but I've always been interested in the realia collections too.

**YOU'RE A SWIMMER, AREN'T YOU? DO YOU KNOW WE'VE GOT SHANE GOULD'S OLYMPIC SWIMMING BAG HERE IN OUR COLLECTION?**

Wow, I didn't. I was an athlete in my childhood and teenage years. I'm a passionate exerciser for pleasure, exploring new parts of Sydney wherever I go. It's how I relax.

I love the whole experience of swimming, it's a deep passion. I swam this morning at the beautiful Prince Alfred Park Pool. My local pool is closed for renovation. I sometimes swim at Ashfield Pool, at Cabarita or the Boy Charlton, close to here, in the summer. I swim all over the place, as often as I can in ocean pools. I'm part of Ashfield Swimming Club. It's the best community swimming club in Sydney. My daughter plays football so on the weekend you find me on fields fully across NSW.

**IMAGINE WE'RE DOING THIS INTERVIEW THOUSANDS OF DAYS INTO THE FUTURE. WHAT WOULD YOU WANT YOUR LEGACY TO BE?**

To continue the transformation and reach of all the Library's programs. To know that every child, every citizen feels welcome to our Library and across the library network. That we continue to be known across the globe as having not only the best collections but the best experiences too. Everything from undertaking research, going to the cafe, the rooftop bar, coming to a talk, ordering a book, seeing an exhibition. To have that sense that there's something for them, whether it's right here on Macquarie Street or across the city and the state.

**I SENSE THAT YOU'RE BURSTING TO GET STARTED.**

I've dreamt for many years about not just touching the surface here, but really understanding the way the Library ticks, its role in society and its connection with the public. I don't know if it's too heavy a phrase but there's something about this role that is a sort of coming home. I am so grateful to George Souris, John Vallance and the team here for welcoming me so warmly. I hope I can continue the great leadership for many years into the future.

# Take 5 FRAMES

WORDS **Richard Neville and Rachel Franks**

## Claxton

***Dr James Mitchell***
**by Marshall Claxton**

*Dr James Mitchell*, a fine but conventional portrait painted in Sydney by visiting English artist Marshall Claxton (1811–1881) in 1854, comes in an equally fine frame. Mitchell (1792–1869) was a wealthy doctor and businessman, and one of Claxton's more important commissions. The portrait, acquired in 1965, was said to be the result of a subscription run at the 'insistence of several ladies'. It was first exhibited at the workshop of its frame-maker and later photographer, Edwin Baldwin. It was then seen in the 1854 Exhibition of the Natural and Industrial Products of New South Wales Preparatory to the Paris Universal Exhibition, which was held in the Australian Museum. Its elaborate gesso and gilt frame, made by Baldwin, also won a prize at the same exhibition. Mitchell's son, book and manuscript collector David Scott Mitchell (1836–1907), who became the great benefactor of the Mitchell Library, hung the portrait in his house on Sydney's Darlinghurst Road.

## Roberts

***Edward DS Ogilvie***
**by Tom Roberts**

Tom Roberts (1856–1931) painted this portrait *Edward DS Ogilvie* (1814–1896) in late 1894, signing the artwork in 1895. Roberts received £20 for the portrait, which was opportunistically painted while he was travelling north on a painting trip. Ogilvie was a wealthy Clarence River pastoralist and it seems that Roberts painted this portrait in the courtyard of Ogilvie's homestead, Yulgilbar. Traditionally, a work is painted and then framed. In this instance, it is much more likely that Roberts painted Ogilvie to fit inside this elaborate carved and gilded late-17th-century Florentine frame, which the sitter had acquired on one of his many Italian sojourns: he settled in Florence in the early 1890s for a time. Indeed, Roberts highlights this extraordinary frame by selecting a muddy-red backdrop to bring out its lustre, instead of the brooding and dark backgrounds seen in almost all Australian studio portraits of the 19th century.

## Glover

***Patterdale landscape, Tasmania***
**by John Glover**

John Glover's (1767–1849) *Patterdale Landscape, Tasmania* was painted around 1833–1843 and acquired by the Library in 1958. Sir William Dixson's (1870–1952) generosity towards the Library is visible across our Gallery walls today; many artworks were gifted to the Library during his lifetime, and more acquired after his death in 1952, with funds from the Dixson Bequest. This painting was offered by London-based art dealer Francis Edwards, and enthusiastically received by former Mitchell Librarian Phyllis Mander-Jones. Undated and unsigned, the work is typical of Glover's Tasmanian landscapes of the early to mid-19th century so was easily attributed to Glover. Mander-Jones was also impressed by the painting's fabulous contemporary frame and agreed to retain it despite the fact that keeping the frame added significantly to the cost of freighting the painting to Sydney. It was, she noted in her correspondence, 'worth the extra expense'.

# Geach

***Burdekin House, Macquarie Street, Sydney***
**by Portia Geach**

This is one of the most alluring paintings held by the Library. It was painted by Portia Geach (1873–1959) around 1920 and acquired in 1961. This small work — measuring only 27.3 × 22.2 cm — suggests a window into a world of excellent conversation and fabulous parties in the house built by the Burdekins, who were a family of ironmongers, merchants and politicians. You can see the glow of life from within this home that once stood proudly at 197 Macquarie Street, now St Stephen's Uniting Church. Tragically, the house was demolished in 1933, one of many colonial-era buildings that fell victim to misguided ideals of progress. This canvas of brilliant colours is housed in a gorgeous frame. The wide, gold border would overwhelm a lesser painting, but is so perfect for Geach's work that it is difficult to imagine this piece in a different frame.

# Edwell-Burke

***Millicent Preston-Stanley***
**by Mary Edwell-Burke**

We usually understand much more about our paintings than about the frames that hold them. Yet, a good frame — or a bad one — hugely impacts our perception of a picture. With portraits, a frame can enhance the sitter, reflecting a status that cannot always be communicated by brushstrokes alone. For this 1950 portrait of Millicent Preston-Stanley (1883–1955), a feisty NSW feminist and politician, the frame adds a lovely glow to a sitter in contemporary tones of deep blue and bright pink. Edwell-Burke, also known as Mary Edwards, carved some of her own frames; she also recycled old frames, recrafting them for her paintings. Here, an ornate 19th-century gilt frame was cut down by Edwell-Burke in 12 places to fit the painting. Look closely and you can see some of the flourishes cut off mid-expression, as well as a few blunt joins between pieces.

# READING THE ROOMS

WORDS **Richard Neville and Rachel Franks**

# Compiling a book about the Library's painting collection prompts its editors to take stock.

In 1834 schoolmaster Henry Carmichael was downbeat about opportunities for Sydney artists:

> In the infancy of a society such as this, no artist ... is likely to entertain the notion that here he will have the chance of realising a fortune by the practise of his profession ... the fine arts must evidently be practised here by men who depend for their support on the useful rather than the ornamental branches of labour.

Surprisingly, however, in the early years of the colony, NSW was well appointed with artists because so many had been transported here!

The work of 'useful' artists was very important. They were more adept at documenting the diversity and complexities of their society than were fine artists. Less constrained by the prescriptions and fashions of high art, and more motivated by the local market, colonial artists created a rich and surprising record of their world, which is why their research and documentary value is unrivalled. Despite these works' high research value, they are often seen as second rate, or even downright bad, and are deposited in libraries rather than art galleries: this is the reason why the State Library of NSW manages one of the largest pictorial collections in Australia. In addition to over 168,000 drawings, prints and watercolours, the Library holds nearly 1300 oil paintings.

The new book that we edited, *Reading the Rooms: Behind the paintings of the State Library of NSW* — made possible through the generosity of The Right Honourable Lord Glendonbrook CBE AM — explores this complex collection. The book's 50 contributors tell stories of a collection that tracks from the 18th century into the 21st century. It is not surprising that these fresh eyes saw new things: when Hong Kong–born librarian Edith Ho, for instance, looks at the ancestral portrait of *Mei Quong Tart's Mother*. She reads its iconography through a cultural lens that was completely absent when the Library first catalogued the painting.

That the Library collects paintings and images at all surprises people, because they assume that libraries are only about books. While photography is now our dominant medium of record, we continually acquire paintings, either as surviving historical records, or as reflections on contemporary experiences. For instance, John Bokor's 2011 painting *Collection Day*, acquired in 2013, captures a typically urban early-21st-century streetscape. On the other hand Arthur Streeton's much earlier celebratory *Panoramic View of Sydney Harbour and the City Skyline*, from 1894 and acquired in 2019, is a perfect summation of how progressive Sydneysiders viewed the new and unprecedented urbanisation of their city.

Not much more than 100 years before Streeton's sparkling painting, in the 1790s artistic endeavours in Sydney were focused on natural history, First Nations people and the settlement itself. There was a scientific, as well as a commercial, urgency to capture the flora and fauna of a landscape that was completely foreign to the British invaders. The identities of the artists, however, are opaque. Some were naval officers, others medical men and at least one was an identifiable convict, but the most prolific have remained frustratingly anonymous.

Convict Thomas Watling (1762–?), who had been transported for forgery, produced images of Sydney Cove and its surrounds while he served his sentence under assignment to surgeon John White (1756–1832). Often given credit for *A Direct North General View of Sydney Cove*, 1794, it is more likely that Watling's sketches of the early colony were the source for this large painting. It was presented to the Library in 1929 and is prized for being the colony's earliest known oil painting. Indeed, for many years it was thought that it was painted in Sydney. The evidence for this is the inscription on its reverse, which reads, in part, 'Painted immediately from nature by T. Watling'. It is much more likely, however, to have been painted in England, probably as an 'advertorial' for the colony. There is no evidence that oil paints were available in Sydney in the 1790s, and the fact that the painting is on a professionally prepared canvas — most likely only available in Europe — clearly suggests a European origin. Its seemingly incontrovertible inscription is much more likely to be the embellishment of an English artist trying to add authenticity to their celebratory canvas of colonial success.

*Macquarie Street, Sydney*, around 1916–35. Acquired 2016. Painting by Frank (Frances) Payne

*Sydney Harbour Bridge Under Construction*, around 1830. Acquired 1961. Painting by Marjorie Kane Smyth

Opposite: *Stephen Butts on a White Horse, Macquarie Street, Sydney*, around 1850. Acquired 1938. Painting by Joseph Fowles

As the colony's confidence grew, more artists landed on Sydney's shores. These included the first free artist John William Lewin (1770–1819), who arrived in 1800 to build a career as a professional artist. Many others would follow Lewin — convict and free — with ambitions that were more easily realised in small colonial communities than the grand halls of nepotism and networking that had to be navigated in Britain. Of course, not all landed in Sydney. Convict Thomas Bock (1790–1855) was sent to Van Diemen's Land, while 64-year-old John Glover (1767–1849), a well-established English artist, emigrated there in 1831 to join his sons. Joseph Lycett (c 1774–1828), was transported to Sydney but was sent to Newcastle because he could not shake his habits of forgery. Others, such as Thomas Tyrwhitt Balcombe (1810–1861), arrived in NSW as young children — their artistic training was entirely colonial.

Jobbing artists made their way through the settlements that developed beyond Sydney's borders, advertising their arrival in local papers. Their length of stay in each town was determined by the number of commissions they could attract. These artists capitalised on a significant shift in Australian art: the transition from the early documentary impulse of colonists to illustrate and classify landscapes, natural history and First Nations people, to the post-1830s emergence of new markets created by the explosion of free immigrants who sought conventional urban imagery, typical of English provincial towns. In 1847, for instance, the newspaper *Bell's Life in Sydney* claimed that among commissions for paintings 'self predominates in the orders given for portraits, ships, and "my horse", and "my house" make up the subject of all the pictures, and vanity pays for these at a reasonable rate'. Oil portraits made a statement, usually an opportunistic assertion of social standing. Many families used portraiture to create a more impressive backstory than their humble, or indeed sometimes criminal, histories warranted.

Indeed, it was a portrait, *Sir Charles FitzRoy*, c 1855, by Henry Robinson Smith (1811–1879), that was one of the first paintings to be acquired by the Library, in 1879. The hope that this donation might instigate a portrait gallery of inspirational colonial administrators and other worthies proved unrealised, but it did set an early tone for future collecting directions. The Library sought pictures that documented what it saw as the triumph of the British Empire in the Pacific. Portraits of governors, ministers, landowners and thriving colonial settlements were enthusiastically acquired.

Yet the collection also records the complexity of colonial European society. One prolific portraitist was ex-convict Joseph Backler (1813–1895). His commissions were almost exclusively confined to the successful working and lower-middle classes, for whom his paintings were most likely their first portrait commissions, often able to reframe a family's history. The descendants of the subject of Backler's 1856 painting *Sarah Cobcroft*, for instance, did not find out until the 1970s that her husband was a convict. On the other hand, establishment figures like Edward DS Ogilvie knew to commission society portrait painters such as Tom Roberts (1856–1931) to preserve their image. Interestingly, no one from the established middle classes commissioned portraits from Backler.

Artists needing to make a living must diversify their choice of subject. So other emblems of success and material possessions were also considered to be worth the cost of an oil painting. Balcombe, for instance, painted favourite hunting dogs, successful racehorses and local celebrities.

Through painting, the built environment also told stories of the achievements of the colony. Paintings of the different iterations of the second Government House, for example, became a sub-genre for artists including George Edwards Peacock (1806–?) and Conrad Martens (1801–1878). Its grand sandstone walls recreated England in a far-off place, symbolically anchoring Port Jackson to British systems by demonstrating authority, prosperity and a certain kind of future. During

Joseph Fowles' portrait of Stephen Butts, showing off on his splendid white horse — like a 19th-century Instagram influencer — in fashionable Macquarie Street, is one of my favourite paintings. Fowles' speciality was equine art; in this work, by far the best portrait is that of the horse. But what was Fowles thinking when he dropped the woman and the child into the painting? Why can we not see their faces? Are they related to Butts, or just some random people who have somehow snuck into his portrait? This curious image speaks to both the clumsiness and the significance of many of the Library's paintings. They may not be good works of art, but they suggest great stories.

**RN**

> I am an accidental art historian. When I started working on this project, my knowledge of oil paintings came from Richard Neville and free-to-air documentaries. How could I write with any authority about the Library's extraordinary collection? Could I produce material that did not just re-rehearse the arguments of the Mitchell Librarian or documentary narrators? The most exciting discovery, for me, was that these paintings were (mostly) willing collaborators. A few have kept their secrets, but many shared their stories as objects and as chapters in the story of NSW. Some of these pictures leave me cold. There are, though, many I now like so much that I routinely acknowledge them — a nod of gratitude – when I walk past them in the Galleries.
>
> **RF**

the 20th century, Government House would be replaced by artists with another structure that symbolised modernity and success: the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Marjorie Kane Smyth's (1888–1974) *View of Sydney Harbour Bridge Under Construction*, c 1930, is a striking example. The 'coat hanger', as it become affectionately known, is a structure that dominates the Harbour in such a way that the colonial past is not forgotten but seems, to many, as being dull in the light of a proud nation.

While the Library has, in the past, concentrated on the great and the good men of the day, it collected portraits of the wives of colonists, such as Augustus Earle's (1793–1838) *Mary Ann Piper and Her Children*, c 1826. In part, this is a portrait of Mary Ann Piper as a trophy wife: her husband could afford to have her painted on a large scale, a clear statement of his (fleeting) success. But *Caroline Chisholm*, painted by Angelo Collen Hayter (1819–1898) in 1852, was a celebration of Caroline Chisholm's own achievements rather than as a wife. This painting's depiction of a woman actively working is unusual: the letters Chisolm is reading and the map on the wall indicate her business life, just as a portrait of a man would include the tools (often law books or other indications of learning) of a gentleman's business.

Although often seen as a colonial collection, the Library has rich holdings of 20th-century paintings, many by professional artists including Herbert Gallop (1890–1958), Douglas Dundas (1900–1981), Norman Carter (1875–1963) and Robert Johnson (1890–1964). These now-conventional landscapes or cityscapes are easily classified as documentary, but in their day they were received as modernist, albeit, conservative artworks. The Library also acquired paintings not just of women but by women, such as and Frances Payne's (1885–1975) *Macquarie Street, Sydney*, c 1911–1916. Over time, attempts at pictorial prettiness gave way to unabashed efforts at realism. Herbert Badham's (1899–1961) *Oxford Street Interior*, 1942, for example, depicts a seedy pub and its patrons in Sydney's Oxford Street.

Oil painting was also employed to document the poor and the dispossessed, though these images

*A Direct North General View of Sydney Harbour*, 1794. Acquired 1929. Artist unknown.

Opposite:
*Mei Quong Tart's Mother*, around 1888. Acquired 2004. Artist unknown.

were usually depictions of curiosities rather than insightful representations of individuals. In these cases, subjects had no agency as to how they were portrayed, or how their images circulated. Early oils such as Joseph Lycett's 1818 *Corroboree at Newcastle* or John Glover's 1835 *Natives at a Corrobory Under the Wild Woods of the Country* were attempts by these artists to conflate their interpretation of Aboriginal culture and experience into one image. These were not images based on understanding or knowledge, but presumption. They were also the perfect paintings for the Library: once seemingly authentic, but now understood to be deeply colonial and problematic.

From the 1840s onwards First Nations people were often painted by artists who saw them as appealing subject matter for an urban audience who now had little engagement otherwise with Aboriginal people. Often situated in idealised, pre-Contact landscapes, Aboriginal men and women can be seen hunting, fishing and practising culture. These images were attractive and marketable illustrations of a life that most urban colonists had never actually witnessed. First Nations people also occupy the margins of numerous artworks as picturesque decorations. Yet while the family group sitting next to the church in *Old St Phillip's, Church Hill*, c 1840, might be dismissed as a pictorial affectation, their presence clearly contradicts ideas that these men and women had left their land.

*Reading the Rooms* represents a specific and select type of image-making. Oil paintings make up one of the smallest genres of artmaking within the Library's vast pictorial collections, but they are some of our most voluble storytellers. Through these works we can understand our past. We can also see it. Beautiful, often flawed, but endlessly fascinating.

***Reading the Rooms: Behind the Paintings of the State Library of NSW* is published by NewSouth and available now.**

**Richard Neville is the Mitchell Librarian. Rachel Franks is Coordinator, Scholarship, at the Library.**

WORDS **Jasmin McGaughey**

# Melissa Lucashenko

## The Miles Franklin Award–winning writer has a new book.

There is a *waiting* in the historical novel *Edenglassie* that feels familiar to me. I think it is a catch in the breath, a tension, a knowing of what is to come with an inability to intervene. Goorie writer Melissa Lucashenko's latest novel opens in the nineteenth century, when Yagara people are hoping that the English, who call themselves masters, will soon leave. We follow Mulanyin, a young visitor from Nerang, near the present-day Gold Coast, and his found connections with the Yagara people living in Brisbane, which was once named Edenglassie.

This past pulls at a present when, in 2024, Aunty Eddie takes a fall in Brisbane which acts as a catalyst for truth, for her family and loved ones. Lucashenko writes, 'The rising pillars of smoke joined the Sky Camps to the earth, knitting the past and the present together in one tremendous tableau.'

I plan a phone call with Aunty Melissa Lucashenko because we live hours and hours from each other, something that proves slightly difficult as we work around multiple time zones. But we reach each other one Sunday morning and make quick work of discussing her history of storytelling, Blackfella things and her renowned novels.

Lucashenko is the youngest of seven children and the only girl. When I ask her about storytelling and its part in her early life, she answers immediately that a library, and her mother, played a huge role. 'My Mum took us to the library religiously because she didn't have money for clothes growing up, let alone for books … The idea of being an author was a bit like saying you want to be an astronaut.'

Melissa Lucashenko at South Bank, Magandjin in Brisbane, 2023.
Photos by Glenn Hunt

Despite feeling the improbability of a career as a writer, Aunty Melissa was creating poetry from her teenage years and throughout university. She began a degree in business, however, with a mind to work in an industry that would actually pay the bills. This is a path similar to my own, and so I ask her how she wound up publishing her work. 'It was the encouragement of an American academic, actually,' she says. 'Elaine McCoy. She's a bit of a citizen of the world. She's back in the States now, but she mentored me ... so I probably blossomed under her.'

We agree that sometimes all it takes is one person.

Aunty Melissa's first published novel was based on a short story she wrote in 1990 while living in Darwin. The story centred around Eagleby, in the City of Logan on the outskirts of Brisbane, and a relationship she'd left, along with the place itself. It was a time in her life that she turned to writing to process it all. This short work eventually became her debut novel, *Steam Pigs*. 'By the time it was published in 1997, I was living in Tonga and knocked off my second book, a young adult book called *Killing Darcy,* and half of my third book, *Hard Yards.*'

**'I wanted to write a better book, I suppose. A different kind of book.'**

I'm a writer myself, so I selfishly ask her what her writing routine is. If she has any trade secrets on creating award-winning work, she doesn't let on. But, like most other writers she knows, she writes in the morning and reckons she's been accidentally keeping school hours. For *Edenglassie,* Aunty Melissa read and researched throughout what she calls a 'four year slog'. *The Bone People*, the Booker Prize–winning novel by Keri Hulme, was one of her major influences, as well as *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver. She says of this novel, which won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Women's Prize as well, 'I thought it was absolutely fantastic. And something to aim for or emulate.'

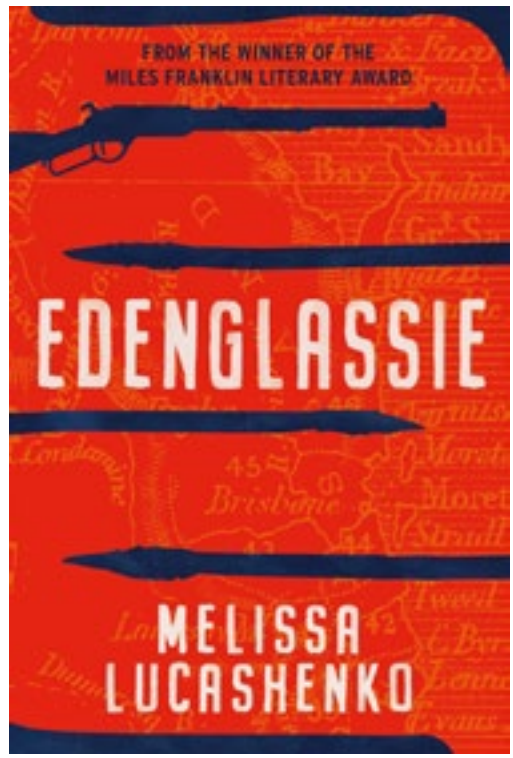
*Edenglassie* depicts the story of Mulanyin, a talented and captivating young Yugambeh man trying to realise his hopes and care for loved ones and Country during the early years of colonisation. It also tells of a time long after Mulanyin, through the striking character Aunty Eddie in Brisbane and her granddaughter Winona as they navigate love, health, politics and the statues of colonisers and others that watch over their home.

The novel opens with Auntie Eddie's fall in South Bank and follows her recovery in hospital. Her voice jumps off the page. 'She was fun to write,' Aunty Melissa tells me. 'And possibly she is an amalgamation of the Aunties I've helped write their memoirs with, and my Mum too ... That kind of language of the 1920s and 1930s was a real joy to excavate for me.'

*Too Much Lip*, published in 2020, was Aunty Melissa's Miles Franklin–winning novel. Its protagonist, Kerry, returns home to Bundjalung Country as her Pop is dying. Her time there is full of family secrets, new romance and her family's mission to protect a river condemned for development. Kerry, a middle-aged Aboriginal woman, was a character Aunty Melissa felt comfortable writing. She says that writing *Edenglassie*, where the protagonists are a young man living in the nineteenth century and a First Nations Elder from the twenty-first century was a challenge. So, she listened to her nephews and thought deeply about what it was they cared for in life. She reflected on the dialogue of people she'd known once — the way others talk is fascinating to her. Indeed, the writing and dialogue in *Edenglassie* feels physical, as if it were woven and composed of multiple layers for the multiple readers who will pick it up.

If you're wondering whether Aunty Melissa felt daunted about beginning another novel after the success of *Too Much Lip*, the answer is yes. 'I wanted to write a better book, I suppose. A different kind of book.' The background work and plotting Aunty Melissa had to do to write *Edenglassie* ended up being a distraction from the long shadow cast by *Too Much Lip*. 'The amount of work in this book was just phenomenal.

## What are we all continuing to miss, ignore or forget?




The research with trying to get the voices right. You know, writing a young man not long after colonisation was very tricky.'

*Edenglassie* also dips its pages lightly into the topic of identity and what it means to be a First Nations person and be accepted by communities as a First Nations person. I ask Aunty Melissa what type of conversations she was having about this as she wrote. She says, 'Alexis Wright once just gave me very brief but pithy advice. She just said to me: Never buy into identity shit. And I've always remembered that and kept that as a kind of motto. So, I don't really talk about it a great deal, but I do a lot of observing.'

These moments of conversations about identity within *Edenglassie* came from Aunty Melissa's aim to, as she says, 'demonstrate what I thought approaching that dilemma with First Nations values looked like. Which is a range of things, you know, it can be well known as incandescent rage. Or it can be Granny Eddie saying, "No, you're thinking like a white man and we bring people in," which she does in response to Winona's scepticism about Johnny newly identifying as Indigenous.

Country is central to the hearts and stories of the Black characters in *Edenglassie*. Country is an undulating, sometimes quiet and sometimes loud character. Mulanyin says:

> 'But in my Country the burragurra crashes onto the sand one hundred times louder; the waves are this high,' he demonstrated with a hand at his neck, 'before they curl over and kiss the beach with passion, as though they really mean it. The pounding of the surf is the sound of my heart; that and the kurrumburum singing up the dawn.'

The lands and seas are painted to life by Aunty Melissa's words and moved images of my own homelands across my mind. The settings are full of depth, history and truth. Only Country leads the characters through life: Aunty Eddie's doctor, young Johnny's care for a small creek, Winona's suggestion to burn down Parliament House as she steps through the iconic West End's Boundary Street. When Mulanyin despairs over tragedy unfolding in his faraway home, he longs for Nerang but questions where he truly belongs. His is a familiar longing for Country, and for people, a sentiment common among First Nations peoples since invasion. There is a discomfort that Mulanyin feels in connections that draw him further from his home. It makes me think of the occasional panic I feel for my own future children. What will they learn of their many cultures when living off Country?

Aunty Melissa and I talk of the lands she writes about in *Edenglassie*. She tells me that she easily walked a couple of hundred kilometres through South Bank and the Brisbane CBD. She tells me of the white historian who showed her places of colonial history — a carpark under the city where the river can be glimpsed running under the buildings. 'And that's what Creek Street in Brisbane is named for,' she says. This makes me pause and think about what I have missed when I lived in this same city. What are we all continuing to miss, ignore or forget?

It is a deeply generational novel; the impacts of characters' actions reach across time. The generations have different perspectives, in the book as it is in life. I marvelled as I read a line like this one, for example, at how Aunty Melissa wrote about generational differences when crafting story: 'Granny Eddie sighed. These young generations had such freedom ... But oh! So much angrier than her generation had ever been.'

Violence of many kinds stands at the forefront of *Edenglassie*. From public executions, language thrown with acidic tongues, hurt and harm hanging over characters in the past and into the present. It is pain that is circular and inexplicable. It reaches from the page and grips my heart. This can be hard to read, and I ask Aunty about her experience writing about this. She answers, 'I suppose because I was in control of what happened to them in the narrative, it might have been easier for me than for a reader ... So that's one of the reasons I split it between the modern and the historic era.'

Aunty Melissa is also deft in the way she reveals extreme hurt and which characters she allows to tell truth within the novel. Even though it can be difficult to consume at times, I felt taken care of. Her use of humour also plays a leading role within *Edenglassie*, as with her previous novels. It comforts and connects me to the characters.

*Edenglassie* asks questions about how so-called Australia can be as it is now. What sort of life can we have, what sort of world can we be in where this history is real, yet largely unknown? Towards the end of the novel, Mulanyin cries to a loved one, 'What has this life become?' His story traces horror and death in places where I've lived and breathed. In the notes that I scribbled while reading I wrote, 'How can we step on this land without constantly thinking of past and present atrocities?'

When I ask Aunty Melissa what she wants her readers to know after reading her work, she is quick with her answer, 'That they live on Aboriginal land,' she says. 'And that the history is with us every second of every day.'

**Jasmin McGaughey is a Torres Strait Islander and African American writer and editor.**

FICTION

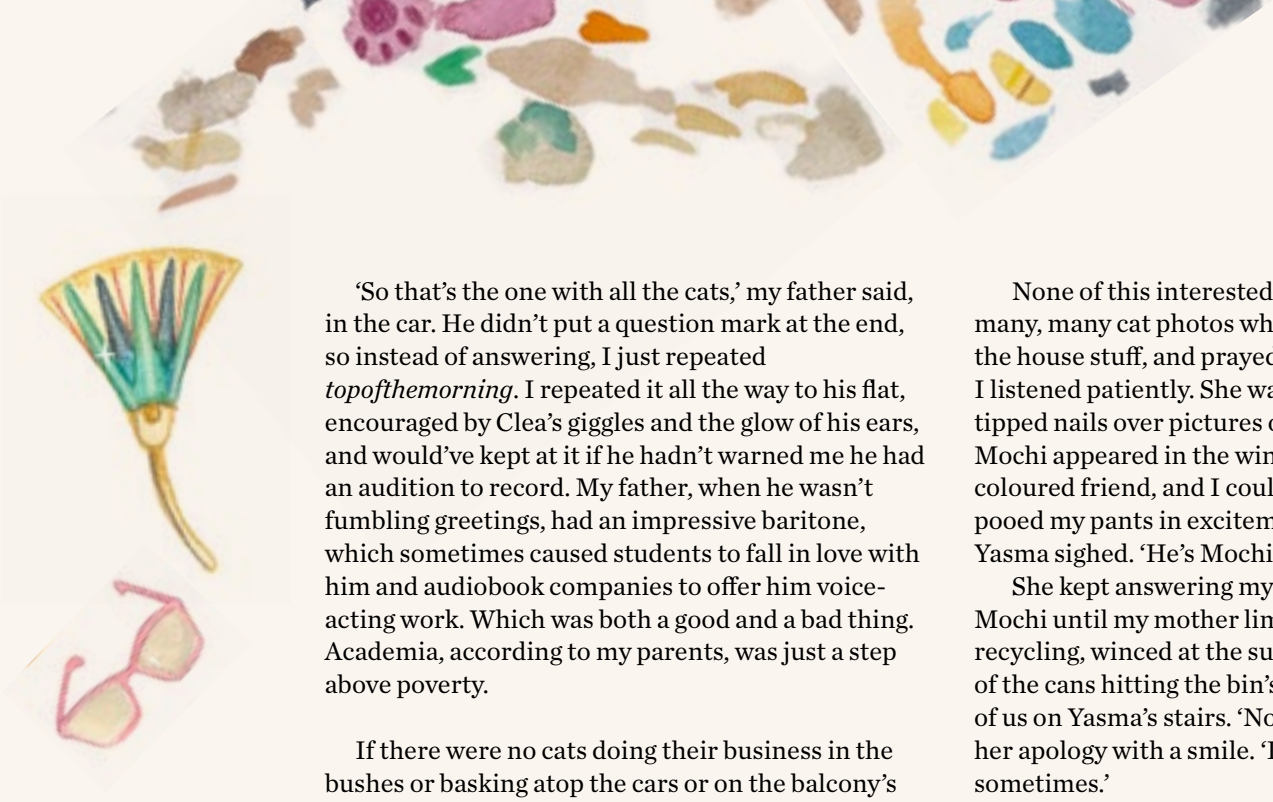
WORDS **Laura Elizabeth Woollett**


# TROPHY WIFE

Yasma moved in after my father moved out. Once, when he came to pick us up, he saw Mochi squatting by the daisies as if laying eggs, and made a *pshhh* sound. I was so offended on Mochi's behalf, I didn't speak to him until dinnertime, and only then to remind him that I wanted a potato cake in addition to minimum chips.

My father kept asking about the cats after that, how many there were, whether they were desexed, who the owner was and whether she seemed insane. From the few times I'd seen Yasma chatting to my mother in the driveway, I didn't think so. But I was more interested in the cats. I didn't even know how to describe Yasma, except to say that she wasn't as old as our old neighbour, who'd been sent to a nursing home, and that she had black hair in a bun, sometimes a braid, and that she sold Converses at the DFO near the airport.

The day my father finally met her, she was in a tracksuit on the balcony with two other girls, gathered around the light of her phone like it was a campfire. One girl had a Puma beanie and a gold nose-ring. The other wore a lilac headscarf and was vaping — toasted marshmallow, I think. Farah, the feathery-maned tabby, slow-blinked at me from the spot by Yasma's feet where she was sunning herself. Yasma's feet were in slides with socks. 'Top of the morning,' my father greeted them, a phrase I'd never heard him use before, which came out sounding like he was speaking in tongues. Yasma looked up from her phone and answered, 'Hey,' and the girls glanced at each other, and Clea pointed at the stairs, where two more cats were lounging, and crowed, 'Kitty-cots!' Everyone laughed, as if she'd said something really clever.



‘So that’s the one with all the cats,’ my father said, in the car. He didn’t put a question mark at the end, so instead of answering, I just repeated *topofthemorning*. I repeated it all the way to his flat, encouraged by Clea’s giggles and the glow of his ears, and would’ve kept at it if he hadn’t warned me he had an audition to record. My father, when he wasn’t fumbling greetings, had an impressive baritone, which sometimes caused students to fall in love with him and audiobook companies to offer him voice-acting work. Which was both a good and a bad thing. Academia, according to my parents, was just a step above poverty.

If there were no cats doing their business in the bushes or basking atop the cars or on the balcony’s concrete, peeking in Yasma’s window was usually the best bet. I first saw Minty, a slinky deaf girl, this way. Another time, Bushra, who I could tell even through the blinds was older than me — something about the mauve nub of her nose, the black stains around her tear-ducts. I was stroking the glass between Bushra and me when Yasma danced into view, headphones on. She saw me. Pointed at her eyes with two fingers, then back at me. She looked so scary, I hid. When I popped my head back up, she was dancing again, shaking her braid.

It must’ve been soon after that. I was with Clea. Near the bottom of Yasma’s stairs, *tk-tk-tk*-ing at Mochi. Clea was making grabby-hands, which Mochi obviously didn’t like. ‘Don’t hit your sister,’ Yasma said, coming out exactly as I was taking a swing, not actually *hitting*. ‘Yeah, yeah. I have sisters too.’ Yasma shook her head and let Mochi in past her sliders. Then she sat on the stairs and asked me a whole bunch of questions: where were my parents from; no, really from; like, how next door were Italian and across the road Russian. My mother always said that asking where people were from was a microaggression, so I just told her how I hated those rich Italian girls — they thought they were better than us. ‘Concrete lions doesn’t mean rich,’ Yasma corrected me. ‘Nobody living out here is rich.’

After that, she showed me some pictures on her phone of the house her father was building for a wedding present. It was nicer than the Italians’, and in a better area, though more industrial than she’d like. Her plan was to use it as a starter-house, then once Bas was earning real money, they’d turn it into an investment property, and she’d be a trophy wife.

None of this interested me much. Yet I’d glimpsed many, many cat photos while she was zoomed out of the house stuff, and prayed she’d show me them if I listened patiently. She was still clacking her blue-tipped nails over pictures of downlights, though, when Mochi appeared in the window, along with a penguin-coloured friend, and I couldn’t stand it, I could’ve pooed my pants in excitement — ‘That’s Sushi,’ Yasma sighed. ‘He’s Mochi’s brother.’

She kept answering my questions about Sushi and Mochi until my mother limped outside with a box of recycling, winced at the sunshine, then at the clatter of the cans hitting the bin’s insides, then at the sight of us on Yasma’s stairs. ‘No worries,’ Yasma met her apology with a smile. ‘I babysit for extra money, sometimes.’

Back indoors, my mother, who’d never paid for a babysitter in her life, told me not to hassle Yasma so much.

I didn’t think it was a big deal that Yasma wasn’t living with her husband, but a while later, my mother stopped me as I was describing Mochi’s toe-beans and made me repeat everything I knew, then shook her head and said, ‘You really buried the lead there, didn’t you?’ Next time she saw Yasma pulling into the driveway, she took out the recycling box, though it wasn’t full, and through the window I heard her telling Yasma about the time our car was broken into, how hard it could be living alone as a woman around here, and Yasma saying wow and mm and literally while sucking up the remnants of a Boost. When my mother returned, I asked what flavour Boost Yasma was drinking. She wouldn’t say.

The Russians across the road were Orthodox, which meant they didn’t believe in contraception, which was why they had eight kids. All the kids were boys, which my mother found creepy. She found the father, who she called Rasputin, creepy too, and Rasputin’s wife, who hardly left the house. Sometimes we heard the baby, Valentin, crying. The eldest son, Alexei, was in year eleven and worked at Coles when he wasn’t doing yard work. Yakov was in my class. At lunch, we sometimes played a game called ‘Weed’, which involved filling sandwich bags with grass clippings then bringing them to his brother Nikita, who’d smell the weed and tell us if it was ‘dank’ or not. Whoever collected the most dank would get a fist-bump from Nikita. I would’ve liked to play Weed outside school, but Rasputin would shout if the boys neglected their

Illustrations by Rosie Handley

yard work, so I made do with riding past on my razor-scooter.

Yakov usually looked up when I scootered past, sometimes waved, and once sneaked me some raspberries from the bush his father had grown from cuttings smuggled from Russia. This time, though, all the boys were clustered examining something in the dirt, and ignored me until I parked my scooter. 'It's those cats,' Misha snarled, looking straight at me. Then he said that I better tell Yasma to watch where they did their business, only those weren't the words he used.

Misha was only in year seven but already scared me more than Rasputin. I tore some leaves and scooped up the mess myself, then carried it home with one hand, my scooter with the other. Mochi and Sushi were being loaves near the bins.
'Be careful, guys,' I warned. 'Be very careful.'

My father had to get Yasma to move her car the next time he picked us up. After, he said, 'Much obliged,' sounding a bit Irish. Later that week, Yasma quizzed me again about where my parents were really from. She was so persistent, I turned the question back on her.

Usually, when something is exciting, I can't shut up. But sometimes a thing is so exciting, I lose my voice and have to go somewhere quiet. 'Did you know: Yasma is *Egyptian*,' I confided in my mother, after poring over *Mysteries & Mummies* for almost an hour. She knew. Was surprised I didn't, considering how much I hassled Yasma.

Yasma hadn't heard of the novels set in Alexandria that my parents had named Clea and me after, but she knew Alexandria, and Bastet the cat-headed goddess, and mummies, and Egyptian Mau cats. In fact, while I'd only ever seen pictures of Maus, she planned to buy a bronze-spotted show kitten once she was a trophy wife, and not only was she well-informed about organ jars, she told me all about why female mummies were always more decomposed than male ones, and that Bastet was the goddess of fertility, and that even tom cats represented divine feminine energy. 'Never trust a man who doesn't like cats,' she advised me.
'It means he's afraid of the Divine Feminine.'

I thought of Misha, and my father. I asked if Yasma's husband liked cats. She said, 'It's complicated,' and that they weren't ready for all that just yet; maybe when the house was built.

Yasma's husband never stayed over. But some nights she watched him play soccer. Yasma used to play too, until school and sports were cancelled, and she gained a bunch of weight, then got an eating disorder to lose the weight. Even though Yasma didn't have an eating disorder anymore, she said she wasn't as strong as she used to be because of it, and had anxiety around training, and anyway had no time. Her husband had time, since he was living at home until he finished his apprenticeship, where his mother cooked and did all the housework Yasma would do when she had a house of her own, but until then nobody could make her.

One afternoon, Yasma came home earlier than usual, not in her usual Converses but in a light-coloured shirt and trousers with gold-buckled shoes and jewellery to match, her hair all shiny-straight down her back. I told her she looked just like Cleopatra. My mother frowned and corrected, Yasma looked 'very nice'. Yasma agreed, beaming, and told us that the Oroton at her DFO was hiring, she loved 'Old Money assetic', couldn't wait to work somewhere elite instead of selling millennial sneakers. My mother wished her luck — but once we were inside, groaned, 'I feel old,' and, 'Never have kids.' She wouldn't answer when I asked, 'What about an Egyptian Mau cat?' though I asked over and over.

Once when Clea was throwing a tantrum, I asked my mother why we couldn't just leave her at my father's studio permanently, and we could live in the unit, just the two of us. It made more sense to me than always moving around, but she got upset, told me never to repeat the comment and that they both loved us equally; besides, she needed a break, too, sometimes — remember how stressed she was the year I couldn't play on playgrounds?

I remembered, sort of, and the leafy street near the uni where we lived until Clea started walking. I didn't repeat the comment to my father. I did tell Yasma, though, who wanted to know why my parents split, what kind of wedding they had, and when I described it, shook her head and said, 'That ain't it.' Egyptian weddings were always luxe, she said; she had six hundred people at hers; there were aunties she'd never even met giving her the evil eye — *that* was it.

Before I was born, my parents went to a lot of costume parties. At one, my mother was Wonder Woman in a red bathing suit and tall gold boots, catching my father with a gold lasso. At another, she was a nun with stigmata, and he was Baphomet. At another, she was a secretary and he was a Mad Man. They got married on a Wednesday, at the registry office, with only seven guests, and the dress she wore cost only $200 and fit tight on her tummy, for I was already inside it. I wanted to cry, suddenly, remembering all this — but then Farrah came

zipping up from the street going, 'Mra-mra-mroo-mree!' So instead of crying, I ruffled her sunny, twig-coloured belly, asked where had she been, where had she been, though I suspected from her joy that she'd come from urgent business at the Russians'.

Yakov confirmed my suspicion, the next time we played Weed. 'Yasma's cats wouldn't do that,' I defended them. That didn't stop Nikita from saying my weed stank and to watch out; Misha had killed possums before, just for fun.

At night, I lay stiff as a mummy, listening to the possums rasping like old men outside our unit. In the end, disaster struck in broad daylight.

I felt like I was in a dream, the moment I spotted the rare white glow of Minty in the driveway. Then a nightmare, as my mother swore and slammed the brakes. Minty was meant to be an indoor cat, because of her disability and sunburn-prone ears. I meant to be helpful, going after her. I didn't mean to scare her across the road, or to scare my mother by crossing without looking, and I really, really didn't mean to scare the hose out of Alexei's hand, so that water flew at Minty, so that Minty flew back into the path of the Italians' silver station wagon.

I never knew blood could be so orange. Nobody knew what to do. Eventually, Rasputin came out with a towel and said, 'We will bury.' Alexei had hosed down the road by the time Yasma finished work.

That weekend, while my father sat in his closet recording a podcast episode about the Knights Templar, Clea and I drew Minty on adventures in Egypt: leaping over pyramids, meeting the Sphinx, dining on Nile fish with Cleopatra. 'Thanks, friend,' Yasma sniffed, when I gave her the drawing. 'This is literally the cutest.'

Alexei must've felt as bad as I did, because around the same time, he came over in his Coles shirt and gave Yasma a big bag of kibble. Soon after, a carton of that fancy cat food with Persian cats on the label. After that, a homemade string-and-feather toy. Then one day just before school holidays, he brought a sand-coloured kitten with a squirrelly tail. He said he found it near the skips behind his work, that he could find another home if Yasma didn't want it, but of course she did. We named her Belka, Russian for squirrel.

Holidays meant I could play with Belka almost every day. Yasma even let her stay in our unit sometimes while she was working; her Oroton was extra busy with Christmas customers. Once, she came home all sparkly eyed because they'd named her Asset Protection Star of the Month, awarded her a $100 voucher. She used it to buy a jewel-green baguette bag, and when she asked if she looked like a boss bitch, I agreed, and so did Alexei, who was still coming over with presents for the cats, and sometimes chocolates and jars of Lotus spread.

I didn't really need to look in Yasma's window anymore to see the cats, but sometimes I did, which is how I learned her and Alexei were boyfriend and girlfriend. When I told Yakov, he said he knew already, and that Alexei had stolen those things from work for her, and wanted to quit school to run away with her. That never happened, though. In the last week of holidays, Yasma came to pick up Belka while my mother was making omelettes, and had to run outside to spew in the daisies. When I asked if her eating disorder was back, she looked at me with bleary, bloodshot eyes and said, 'I wish, babe.'

We visited Yasma once, after she moved into her starter-house. Even though it could've fit twenty cats easily, she'd gotten rid of every one except Bushra. Her family had wanted her to give up Bushra too — there was something in cat poo that was supposedly poisonous to pregnant ladies — but she'd cried so much at the thought of giving up her lifelong pet, her husband finally agreed to scoop the litter himself until the baby came, though mostly his mother did it.

I spent most of the visit tickling Bushra's chin, cooing, 'Bush-Bush-Bushra, I missed you.' The baby didn't interest me, even knowing it was Alexei's. Neither did Yasma, really. Really, I hadn't forgiven Yasma for not asking me to take the cats, and for leaving her window open that time Minty escaped, and for not knowing about the bright goop of Minty's insides on the road, and most of all, for ruining everything. Also, it felt bad to look at her. Even after she stopped crying about the cats and told us about the money Bas was making as an electrician, how much better off she was than the cousins who'd married doctors who ended up buried in loans working seventy-hour weeks, how lucky she was to be a trophy wife, she looked old and tired to me. Though I know now she wasn't old. She was closer to my age than my mother's.

**Laura Elizabeth Woollett is the author of a short story collection *The Love of a Bad Man* (2016), which was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Fiction and the Ned Kelly Award for Best First Fiction. Also published by Scribe are her three novels, *Beautiful Revolutionary* (2018), shortlisted for the 2019 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction, the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal and the Kathleen Mitchell Award, and *The Newcomer* (2021). Her latest novel, *West Girls* (2023), was reviewed in *Openbook* Spring 2023.**

*When they shut their eyes and pause for a minute, fishers have a place they go to in their mind. A special place, a fishing place. Mine is called Paradise, but you won't find it on any map.*

Anna Clark, *The Catch: Australia's love affair with fishing*

# GONE FISHING

Bait and tackle. Spearfishing. Catch and release. Beach fishing. Trout fishing. Over-fishing. Tinnies. Jetties. Yabbying. Summer is the time to drop a line.

**Swimming in the fishway at Brewarrina Weir**

The weir overflowed for the first time in years in 2020 and brought back to life the heritage-listed Aboriginal fish traps, Baiame's Ngunnhu, one of the oldest human-made structures in the world. 'When we arrived in Brewarrina we had no idea the water was coming down the the Barwon and Darling Barka Rivers from the floods. It was the most euphoric atmosphere. The kids were going absolutely berserk. There are no words for the joy we witnessed.' Photo by Mark and Jenny Evans

**Yabby racing at Louth**

A boy points to his yabby at the start of a yabby race near Louth in north-western NSW. The yabbies are put through their paces before ending up in the cooking pot. Photo by Jenny Evans

**Underwater swimmer**

Clovelly Beach in Sydney is a popular swimming spot with an abundance of underwater marine life. My favourite place to take photos on a hot summer's day. Photo by Jenny Evans

**Father and daughter fishing**

Brunswick Heads, northern NSW
Photo by Louise Beaumont,
courtesy Getty Images

**Black Marlin**
Coral Bay WA
Photo by Narelle Autio

type c print
40 x 58 cm
edition of 10 + 1AP

80 x 120 cm
edition of 15 + 1AP

**Before School**
Woolgoolga NSW
Photo by Narelle Autio

type c print
40 x 58 cm
edition of 10 + 1AP

80 x 120 cm
edition of 15 + 1AP

Images courtesy of the artist and Michael Reid Sydney + Berlin

ESSAY

WORDS **Paul Daley**

What happens when a classic book no longer sits with the values and ideals of twenty-first-century readers, young and old?

# THAT'S OFFENSIVE

We know that contemplating the past brings insight to the present, so it stands to reason that classic books chart the evolution of societies and cultures.

A comparative reading of an original work and its updated versions would seem to be an excellent way of assessing cultural and societal change. So, I want to ask what it means to issue re-edited works by famous writers such as Roald Dahl, Enid Blyton and May Gibbs. Does changing their books so that they better correspond with the sensibilities of contemporary readers amount to censorship?

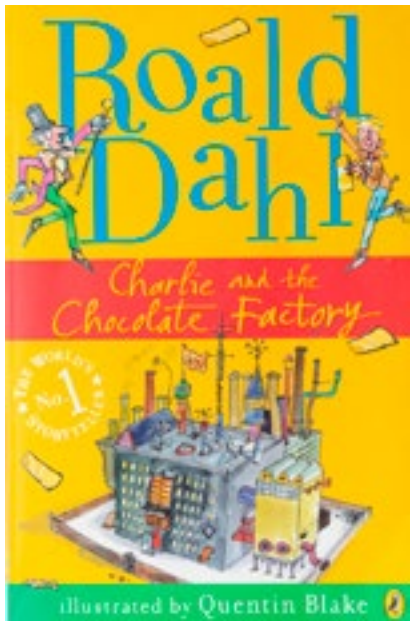
Tensions between purists who'd rather see original, purportedly offensive works wither into obscurity on library shelves or in stacks and those who'd prefer that they be rewritten for new generations of readers are, too often, presented as a binary. Surely this issue is far more nuanced than a reductive question of either/or. Indeed, the benefits of having the original version sitting alongside the rewritten one on a library shelf, of considering and comparing both, is invaluable for both parsing history and nurturing a critical faculty in readers of all ages.

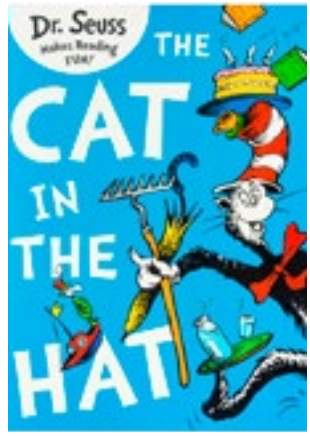
There are few better ways to stir cultural musings into a culture war battleground than by suggesting that dead twentieth-century authors — especially those who wrote for children — be rewritten so as to comply with today's more progressive social mores. It's great tabloid fodder. But the prosaic truth is that some of the more high-profile books in the constant eye of the storm, not least Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, have already been rewritten due to cultural concerns.

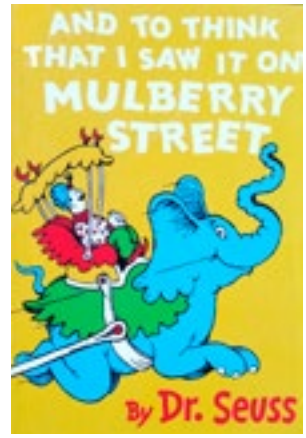
In 1973 Dahl himself re-edited *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which was first published in 1964, in response to criticism by the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People in the United States. The Association had taken exception to Dahl's depiction of Oompa Loompas as Black African 'pygmies' that Willy Wonka had 'discovered' and 'saved' from predatory Whangdoodles and Snozzwangers by sending them to work as virtual slaves in his factory in return for cacao beans.

Nonetheless, the response to a more recent decision by Dahl's publisher Puffin, and the Roald Dahl Story Company, to make hundreds of significant changes to his canon, including further amendments to *Charlie*, has been met with derision and outraged claims of censorship and cultural vandalism. The edits include replacing pejorative descriptions (including 'fat' and 'ugly') of some characters.

Salman Rushdie wrote: 'Roald Dahl was no angel but this is absurd censorship. Puffin Books and the Dahl estate should be ashamed.' It seems that the




Cover of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl, illustrations by Quentin Blake. Courtesy Alamy

Cover (also opposite) of the seemingly timeless *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr Seuss. Courtesy Alamy

Cover of *And to Think that I Saw It on Mulberry Street,* by Dr Seuss. Courtesy Alamy

**... queer has become 'odd', 'gay' is now 'happy' and 'biscuits' are 'cookies', presumably to appeal to more American readers.**

commercial imperative of ensuring a constant stream of new readers (and, thus, book buyers) might assuage any such literary shame among those who profit. Such textual revisitation seems more responsive to evolving sensibilities than, as some critics would contend, being symptomatic of any recent knee-jerk 'woke' revolution.

Another children's classic, about a man who could talk to animals, *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* by Hugh Lofting, first published in 1920, was edited in the 1960s and 1970s to extract certain passages, including one where the skin of the Black prince, Bumpo, is bleached to make him more appealing to Sleeping Beauty. In 1986, an even more significantly altered edition, published to mark the centenary of the author's birth, racially decolonised the book further. This revision was initiated by the author's son, Christopher Lofting.

Dr Seuss's seminal 1937 picture book — his first — *And to Think that I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, Mark Twain's 1885 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and many of bestselling children's writer Enid Blyton's works, published between the 1920s and the early 1960s, are among other books whose timelessness has been enhanced through judicious awareness or sensitivity readings and re-editing. This process has removed racially offensive and pejorative language, and class and gender stereotypes. Blyton's stories have been updated frequently so that they are more contemporary, at least semantically: 'queer' has become 'odd', 'gay' is now 'happy' and 'biscuits' are 'cookies', presumably to appeal to more American readers. Characters from *The Magic Faraway Tree* have been renamed too: Jo has become Joe, Bessie is now Beth and Fanny is Frannie.

When it comes to rewriting, as far as publishers, copyright holders and writers' estates are concerned, it would seem that the commercial imperative of appealing to the next generation of readers is as compelling as any social — or even moral — responsibility to replace language that may offend by today's standards. The copyright holder — be it the living writer, a dead author's estate, their publisher or family — usually has authority to amend texts so as to ensure commercial viability and cultural relevance. Conversely, they can withdraw books from publication entirely. But when copyright returns to the public domain, usually 70 years after an author's death depending on legal jurisdiction, the original can be commercially republished by anyone willing to take a commercial risk.

In 2021, Dr Seuss Enterprises, the copyright holder for Theodor Seuss Geisel's major published works, announced it was permanently ceasing to publish or license six titles, including *Mulberry Street*, because they 'portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong'. *Mulberry Street* depicts Chinese people in stereotypical ways, with its yellow-tinted illustrations of people with slanted eyes and pigtails. The copyright of *Mulberry Street* expires in 2033. Should any publisher at that point reprint the original version, it could be viewed alongside the edition that was in print until recently — in 1978 Dr Seuss himself re-illustrated the book to make it less racially offensive.

When I read books by Dahl, Blyton or Dr Seuss as a child — or had them read to me — in the late 1960s, as far as I can remember, for all of their stereotyping regarding race or appearance, none was at odds with my sensitivities. But, then again, I was brought

up with golliwogs in my cot and Benny Hill on the TV. I was also read May Gibbs's *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* stories, with all the racial connotations of their bad, black, hairy Banksia Men. These stories were significantly re-edited and illustrated by the Gibbs estate to much reactionary — but passing — controversy in the late 1990s. The books remain in print.

My earliest introduction to adult Australian literature, meanwhile, were the works of Andrew 'Banjo' Paterson and Henry Lawson, collected editions of which my father gave me for an early birthday. I can't recall exactly what 11- or 12-year-old me made of Paterson's or Lawson's largely white, male Australia — or their portrayal of Indigenous people as mostly indolent, dim and God-fearing. I read them very differently now of course, critically but always with a historian's eye as to how they reflect the Australia they came from. I look for what has — or hasn't — changed enough.

As writer Bruce Pascoe observed: 'Henry Lawson, who ignored Aboriginal people, wrote the great poem "Faces in the Street", and every time I'm in a city, part of my journey is in step with the rhythm of that poem . . . But Lawson was thinking of the noble white poor, they were his heroes, whereas he lived in a world where the broken armies of black resistance were scattered in the streets about him: yet one of the only times he mentioned them was to condemn them as cheats and scoundrels in *The Drover's Wife*. ... Our great laureate had contempt [for Aboriginal people] ... and the pages of our literature are still filling with new excuses and conditional regret.'

Today, a critical reading of Paterson and Lawson — and other celebrated Australian writers of their time, including CJ Dennis and Dorothea Mackellar — is instructive. To me, it shows an Australian genre in which Indigenous people served, at best, as literary extras, ancillary and incidental, decorative of white narratives. At worst, they were entirely absent.

Paterson and Lawson might seem shamefully anachronistic to today's more progressive Australian readers. Certainly, they reflected an Australian late-colonial and early-Federation view of the fledgling White Australia: one that fallaciously assumed it was witnessing the extinction, or complete assimilation, of Indigenous non-citizens. Re-reading these writers today, comparatively with some popular Australian fiction, I'm left with a gnawing, discomforting sense of how little might actually have changed.

'Bush noir' is one of Australia's most popular contemporary fiction genres. With notable exceptions, its stories focus on crimes by white people against white victims in places devoid of significant Black characters and Indigenous history (rendering the 'noir' literally absurd).

The books are mostly devoid of any sense of deep-time connection to Country, despite Country being the setting of crimes unaccounted for against generations of Indigenous people and where the long tail of colonial oppression still trails.

Small towns with big secrets! In fact, nearly all our towns have as bedrock some notoriously ugly open truths: white settler families killed the Black custodians and stole their land. This is certainly no secret. Too much popular, contemporary Australian fiction fails to grapple with that discomforting reality.

While Lawson, Paterson and Dennis still inhabit the shelves of our libraries and indeed my own home, they are hardly in vogue. Their words are not easily summoned by memory. The same can't be said of Mackellar, whose totemic poem 'My Country' is still invoked as a de facto Australian national anthem. Generations of Australians are conversant with several lines from the poem first published as 'Core of My Heart' in 1908.

> I love a sunburnt country
> A land of sweeping plain,
> Of rugged mountain ranges,
> Of drought and flooding rains.

While Mackellar penned numerous volumes of poetry, novels and plays — as evidenced by her substantial archive in the Mitchell Library — 'My Country' is her legacy. The poem — like the 'My' of its very title — is exclusively white. There is no sense at all in it that the land of which she adoringly and appreciatively writes and takes personal sentimental possession of, is imbued with rich Indigenous antiquity.

Literary and social historians may ponder how it is that having spent so much time on the Liverpool Plains, where Indigenous dispossession was ongoing and where massacres of Aboriginal people remained far larger in living memories than distant 'secrets', Mackellar took such a historically amnesiac approach in 'My Country'. Even more compelling is how, for all its great Australian silence, the poem still resounds so timelessly today.

Instructively, the second line of Australia's national anthem 'Advance Australia Fair', was changed in 2001, to reflect more than 60,000 years of Indigenous continental habitation. 'For we are young and free' became 'For we are one and free', rendering the new anthem no less contestable given the ongoing bitter divisions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, not least in relation to the referendum on constitutional recognition.

So, might Mackellar's 'My Country' be rewritten today to more fully reflect modern, progressive Australia's greater conversance with its difficult history and ensure its currency with future generations? The truth is, it doesn't need to be.



From left: Covers of *The Magic Faraway Tree* and *The Folk of the Faraway Tree* by Enid Blyton. Courtesy Alamy

Eric Bana in a promotional poster for the 2021 film *The Dry*, adapted from the bestselling bush noir novel by Jane Harper. Courtesy Alamy

It is already secure, in spite of — or perhaps because of — its great historical omission, in the perpetual Australian national consciousness. Of course, 'My Country' would be better read alongside the poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal or the short stories of Tony Birch, both Aboriginal writers.

To my mind, questions of old or new, or of original versus bowdlerised versions that better reflect the cultural, racial and gender sensitivities and identities of today, are at their thorniest not when the books are amended. Instead, it's when 'inappropriate' originals are removed from public access altogether.

In early 2023, one Melbourne high school removed three dozen twentieth-century titles from its library shelves in an effort to 'decolonise' its book collection. The texts the school removed were those that referenced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as nomadic hunter–gatherers, or that portrayed European invasion and colonisation as peaceful and benign. It removed any anthropology or history book that didn't reference frontier war and the violent dispossession of Indigenous people. While the school removed 36 books from its library's shelves, it designated another 12 as 'restricted', meaning that while they were judged as being problematic, they also included unique material that could not be easily sourced.

Of course all libraries with limited shelf space must clear some old books to make way for new ones. Some of the books removed had not been borrowed since the mid-1990s. The school's library was also supplemented with recently published books on Indigenous history and culture, including Duane Hamacher's *First Astronomers: How Indigenous Elders read the stars* and no doubt Bruce Pascoe's book *Dark Emu*, as well as the many prize-winning novels by First Nations writers that represent a kind of golden age of Indigenous literature.

Among the books removed was *The Dawn of Time: Aboriginal myths in paintings* by Charles P Mountford and Ainslie Roberts. Mountford was an autodidact anthropologist who led the 1948 American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. He was considered progressive among his peers for his understanding of Aboriginal culture and customs. His life — and parts of his archive, and that 1948 expedition — partly inspired my 2022 novel *Jesustown*, about frontier violence and cultural theft. But today his views — and intrusive methods — are archaic and morally questionable, especially when compared with the ethics and practice of most current Australian anthropologists.

But books such as his still have value. An informed reading of Mountford and his acolytes — for all their racial stereotyping, cultural intrusion and thefts — can illustrate how history's omissions are being filled by the knowledge seekers of today, if too slowly.

So perhaps we shouldn't withdraw Mountford and his ilk from the shelves. Instead, we should read him alongside *First Astronomers* and so many new Indigenous voices.

**Paul Daley writes about Indigenous history, Australian culture and national identity for *Guardian Australia*. His most recent novel is *Jesustown*, published by Allen & Unwin in 2022.**

# Full of grace

**when I was Mary**
**I towered over Joseph**
**his name was Adam Smith**
**he had the blondest hair and bluest eyes**

**we had finished grade five**
**school holidays adrenalin**
**it was Christmas Eve**
**a packed house**
**thurible smoked us out**

**three wise men**
**from grade four**
**flanked a manger**
**Mum and Dad**
**brought their best show**

**from fighting at home**
**to smiles and wedding rings**
**my three brothers**
**a tryptich of altar boys**
**serving under the cross**

**the itch of the veil**
**the sting of the salt**
**hot on my cheek**
**the congregation sang**
***Come to the water***
***You who are thirsty***

**Jesus cradled in my arms**
**the only baby I've ever had**

**Anne-Marie Te Whiu**

Anne-Marie Te Whiu, an Australian-born Māori who belongs to the Te Rarawa iwi in Hokianga, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a poet, editor, producer and weaver. Her forthcoming debut poetry collection *Mettle* will be published by UQP.

Illustration by Rosie Handley

ESSAY

WORDS **Felicity Plunkett**

# TO FIND SOMETHING *beautiful* IN THIS

## The life-changing qualities of one of the HSC's most demanding courses, English Extension 2

Munira Tabassum Ahmed, an 18-year-old student and emerging writer, remembers her kindergarten teacher furnishing her with 'books of increasing size' to nurture her passion for stories when she was a small child. By the time she was 14, she was publishing poems in acclaimed journals, including *Voiceworks* and *The Lifted Brow*.

Her work began attracting attention and honours. She was appointed a youth curator and moderator for Sydney Writers' Festival in 2020–2021, received the 2022 Kat Muscat Fellowship for professional development, was a finalist in the National Youth Poetry Slam and co-founded the online journal *Hyades*. All the while, she worked towards Higher School Certificate results that earned her a place in Medicine at the University of NSW, where she is completing her first year. Part of her HSC included English Extension 2, a fourth unit of HSC English in NSW that has been in place since 1999. Students — around 1200 of them took the course in 2022 — must produce a major work, a detailed reflection statement and a journal.

Ahmed's major work for the course was the tender and resolute 'Biomythography for the Last Poet-King'. (Major work word lengths vary between forms, with short stories capped at 6000 words.) The seeds of its ideas, which she describes as 'the nature of language; looking at poetry and naming as a form of self-conception' were fed by her extensive reading, including poet Audre Lorde who invented the term *biomythography* in her work *Zami: A new spelling of my name*. It describes a formal meld of biography, myth and history.

A refrain runs through Ahmed's work: *The role of the poet is to find something beautiful in this*. It slips and echoes between lyric prose and poetic slivers of a story about women's lives during and after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. It begins with

## More important is what the creative work we do teaches us, and where it leads.

a first-person voice: 'Forgive me when I cannot speak.' Yet it goes on, marvellously, to tell the story through 'the communal lens of Bengali womanhood'. This shifting between forms and voices embodies, as she puts it, 'a crossing, a destabilisation of a linear, individualist narrative'. In her accompanying reflection statement, Ahmed writes:

> My mother's name, Shaheda, derived from Shahida, comes to mean witness, comes to mean martyr. She was born just before the Bangladesh Liberation War broke out, so her nation is a year younger than her. When I was younger, I would lie my head down next to hers, briefly, while she slept so I could be sure she was still breathing. The role of the poet is to find something beautiful in this.

To find beauty, to tend and pay attention to what flourishes even amid violence and injustice, is far from easy. It refuses both looking away and relinquishing hope. It means thinking through the impossible and imagining the possible. Ahmed's words express the burden, duty and beauty of many artists' work, that includes emotional labour and imaginative and intellectual energy. This is the work around a thousand HSC students undertake each year in English Extension 2. This essay is, in part, a letter of love and gratitude to these young artists.

The course is a celebration of creativity itself — much vaunted in educational settings — which is about more than the work any one person produces. It is about freedom and agency, witnessing difficult things, sitting with uncertainty and contradiction, being willing not to know, and to find out. *To find something beautiful in what we face.*

Available to students who take English Advanced and English Extension 1, English Extension 2 offers a rare educational space. It can play a foundational role in the writing and thinking of its students, so much so that it's fair to say that English Extension 2 affects the landscape of art and thinking in this country.

Most students are 17 or 18 years old, and must simultaneously undertake all the other subjects needed to complete the HSC. Major works range widely across genre and subject and are driven by curiosity and passion. Each student chooses unique formal and conceptual elements, from essays comparing translations of *Beowulf* or considering Alexis Wright's novels, to films about memory and hyperreality, lyric essays, podcasts and performance poetry.

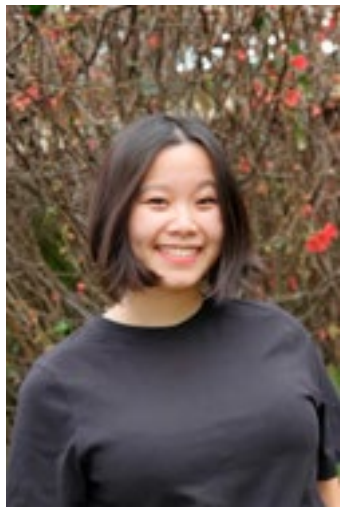
I am a passionate advocate of the course, its former Chief Examiner and someone working in writing, publishing and education, and two things are obvious to me. It empowers writers, artists and thinkers. English Extension 2 will soon turn 25, old enough to identify celebrated artists among its graduates. (See box on page 51 for a list.) The second thing I notice is how freedom — in all its scariness — produces brilliance.

I first became involved with the course as a new academic. I'd completed a PhD in Literature at the University of Sydney and was a lecturer at the University of New England in Armidale when I was appointed to the exam committee for English Extension 1. Later, I became Chief Examiner of English Extension 1 and 2.

During my five-year term my children were born, flinging me into the creative challenges of working and parenting. When students think of HSC examiners, they probably don't imagine a new mother boarding a small plane to Sydney for a day's exam-setting, being pulled over by airport security in the aftermath of 9/11 to explain the workings and purpose of a breast pump, or carrying in a sling a newborn (who would herself later write a major work) to check an exam draft.

Holding together a life of babies, writing and teaching, mostly as a solo parent, I became deeply interested in creativity's logistics. How to sustain a practice, how to move from an amateur to a professional approach, how to fit creative work in alongside everything else. All this is relevant to Extension 2 students.

My requisite study of the theory and practice of creativity continued when I resigned from academia to focus on my own work, and others'. I made my living as a freelancer, editing other writers' work,

From left: Vivian Pham. Photo courtesy of Penguin Random House; Annie Zhang; Cole Johnson. Photo by Kelly Chen, Kelly Photography; Munira Tabassum Ahmed

mentoring, reviewing, and publishing poems, essays and books. I was awarded the Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Prize for my poetry collection *Vanishing Point*, which was published by University of Queensland Press. I was subsequently appointed Poetry Editor with UQP, where I developed and edited other writers' work. Wanting to highlight the work of the brilliant generation of poets around me, including Samuel Wagan Watson, Ali Alizadeh and Sarah Holland-Batt, I edited an anthology, *Thirty Australian Poets*.

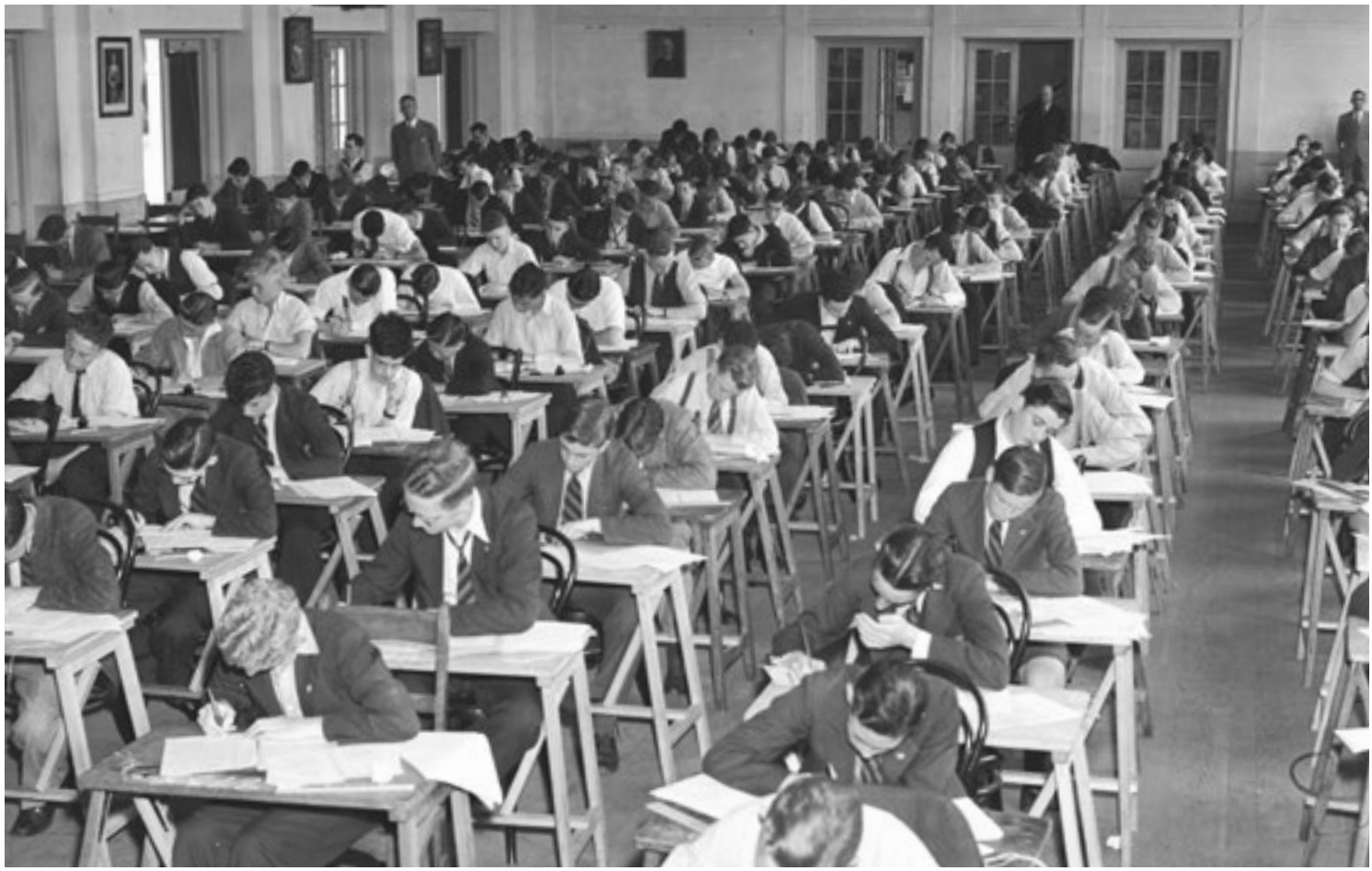
Since moving back to Sydney in 2010, I've worked extensively with English Extension 2 students and teachers, including with the State Library's WordeXpress program. Light aircraft were involved again, as a small team of librarians and speakers travelled to Orange, Albury, Tamworth and beyond to run masterclasses on research, craft and course requirements for students. Lumberingly, we transported a suitcase carrying the journals students complete as part of the course, a treasury of creative notebooks filled with the glorious abundance of artists' assemblages — quotations, sketches and drafts.

These trips highlighted both the grit and adventure of the course. Teachers travelled through the night with their students to see us, while some students made the trip alone. Every year, there are teachers with a single student doing the course and others teaching the course for the first time. Some students complete their major work without a peer. Students must read widely across literature, philosophy and politics, fuelled by their teachers' and mentors' suggestions, and by serendipity and collaboration.

In the course's early years, everyone adjusted to the freedom it offers. Then as now, teachers support the young writers, artists and researchers taking risky, exhilarating and divergent paths. Students shoot and edit films, script and record podcasts; some read philosophers; others experiment with poetic forms, from sonnets to ghazals, or explore metafiction.

Eszter Coombs, the state's top HSC student in 2020, wrote a fictionalised history of lobotomies. Janek Drevikovsky topped the state in 2014 with 'Translator, Traitor', revelling in the course's 'daunting open-endedness' to write a labyrinthine story about translation. Tyler Kang's film 'The Extra' was awarded the top mark in 2022 for its savvy critique of racist and sexist stereotypes in the film and television industry.

Learning to develop and edit your own work is crucial. A decade after her Extension 2 experience, Annie Zhang has become a writer and editor, now with publisher Hachette. Zhang highlights the 'relentless exercise in editing' that a major work entails, saying it was 'my first proper experience of receiving and incorporating structural feedback, and meticulously honing every detail of my language'. This, she says, was 'formative for my writing and editing practice today. I learned how important it is to stay with a work and continue to give it investment, energy and precise attention.' Zhang comments on the opportunity she had 'to dedicate myself to rigorously refining a single creative project'.



The autonomy and creativity required by an English Extension 2 Major Work is a long way from traditional exams. Students taking their Intermediate Examinations in a Sydney boys high school in 1938. *Sunday Sun*, 24 November 1938. Photographer unknown

Educational systems can struggle with the implications of freedom. Students are often encouraged to follow templates and hold the unknown and mysterious at bay. Extension 2 remains a rare counterpoint, trusting and respecting students' agency and capacity for discovery, the kind Pulitzer-winning poet Carl Phillips alludes to when he writes: 'to acknowledge mystery — is not ... an admission of defeat by mystery but instead a show of respect for it.'

Freedom is central to Cole Johnson's 2018 major work, a short story, 'Custody', set in 1978. Bridging family history and fiction, it focuses on Jean, who loses custody of her son after leaving her marriage to live with her partner Enid. The court permits Jean a monthly overnight visit, provided she and Enid don't discuss their 'sexual proclivities'. The judge depicts her as 'distant, intelligent and unemotional, conservative yet androgynous in appearance'. These words might be 'ink stains on a page' yet, to Jean, they are dangerous, 'newborn lizards, scuttling towards her'. Homosexuality, the judge opines, 'seems to me something of an affliction ... avoided if possible'. 'Custody' is about how Jean, and then Johnson himself, as a student coming to understand his own sexuality, might find something beautiful where blight and grief have been sown.

Johnson is now completing an Honours degree in Psychology. He finds the relationship between content and form, so central to English Extension 2, offers a lens through which to consider the discipline, along with documentation, storytelling and process. While he appreciates psychology's application of scientific method, he finds 'a bit of a disconnect between the content and form of psychological research'. For a discipline 'studying the wonderfully nuanced human condition', how might form and language work to allow more people a means of expression?

In his teens, Johnson started to explore his family tree and wrote a diary about a family holiday with his two grandmas. His family found his depiction of one of his grandmas getting lost, crashing the hire car and losing the keys, 'hysterically harsh'. Yet looking at the family tree, 'populated with heterosexual dyads', and seeing how this structure elides other lives, he began to think about what isn't typically told, particularly the absent queer stories.

Johnson realised, as he wrote, that the story, like its protagonist and the woman on whom she is based, 'could no longer be defined by damage'. It became, instead, both condemnation and commemoration, 'equal parts hurt and healing'. His interest in 'what it means to be told someone's story, to share your own, to share someone else's', and the rich network of ethical and imaginative questions this opens into, has affected his study of psychology: 'More than doing no harm, I feel really strongly that sharing someone's story should be done in a way that actively does them good.'

## 'It gave me a sense of autonomy as a student.'

Vivian Pham's major work was also fuelled by family history and ethical questions of empathy and representation. To write about trauma within the Vietnamese diaspora, of which she is a part, felt freighted with 'grave responsibility'. She wanted her readers to be able to 'step into the shoes of all those who have been too over-simplified, or altogether erased, by our construction of history'. I read her poetic sequence in the 2018 Young Writers' Showcase, an annual anthology of some the year's best major works. It begins:

> here,
> a coin of light to float in the satin-night sky
> a shape to sharpen the unyielding dusk
> here,
> a tiny fishing boat to carry two hundred too many
> powered by wind and half-answered prayers
> here,
> bodies suspended over a blade of water

I knew immediately that this was as strong as any poetry I read in my other professional roles. It was obvious from Pham's capacity to compress language, and offer as sharp and limpid an image as that 'blade of water', that she had read a lot of poetry. I contacted her to thank her and she told me her first novel, *The Coconut Children*, was forthcoming with Penguin Random House. (It was published in 2021.) I remain astonished that Pham completed a novel during her high school years, one that maps the shape and grain of fierce and fragile resilience with such acuity and insight.

Pham told me that when she was in primary school, she watched her sister Kim Pham, now a screenwriter and filmmaker, complete a film for her major work. She witnessed this freedom, and could appreciate that the course licenses creativity in a way, she says, 'my mum would understand because it had academic consequences'. She was the only student in her year taking Extension 2 and Extension 1. Pham acknowledges an inspiring teacher, Livia Bolanca, remembering their 'long, meandering conversations'.

Pham says, 'I was interested in writing poetry inspired by the oral storytelling of refugee families, and how I could write critically about this by comparing it to certain tropes found in Ancient Greek epics.' Reading her vibrant reflection statement, you feel the momentum of her reading. She comments: 'I wasn't only expected to choose my own reading list, I was consistently asked to reflect on and record what each piece of writing was teaching me. It gave me a sense of autonomy as a student.' Instead of set texts she read begrudgingly, 'I was able to talk to a teacher I admired about contemporary works of poetry that resonated with me and that I had never heard mentioned in other classes, like Ocean Vuong and Safia Elhillo.'

I am exhilarated by the work of English Extension 2 students. Two of them happen to be my own children, who have always lived with the course. My son Benjamin Hamer emphasises the total freedom of being the architect of the work, being accountable to himself. He says the experience was 'more liberating and more challenging than anything else I'd done in high school English'. He adds, it 'improved my capacity to think and work independently. I had never undertaken a project of that scale — and haven't really since in my undergrad studies — and it felt like just the right stretch of my abilities.' His major work, about the observant documentaries of American filmmaker Frederick Wiseman demanded, he says, 'a rigour I probably wouldn't have found outside of school as a 17 or 18-year old.'

Imogen Plunkett Hamer (the baby in the sling) says: 'I found it particularly valuable and satisfying as it all came from me, every idea, with no specific prompt.' The 'self-directed' nature of the course was exhilarating as she wrote 'Silvia, Three Times', a story tracing the ripples of connection

between three generations of women. Inspired by Portuguese writer and poet Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, Imogen became interested in the 'flawed' aspects of writing and readers' agency.

She believes, as do I and I suspect does anyone who participates in Extension 2, that 'students who read a lot in different forms — books, film, music, non-fiction — will get the most out of this course, because they will have prepared for it before even thinking about their specific work.'

Of course there are vagaries and controversies associated with assessing creative work, both in this course and beyond it. Important to a good major work is an alignment of form and concept, as each work mentioned here embodies. More important is what the creative work that we do teaches us, and where it leads. Carl Phillips describes this as 'that fumbling forward into the unknown'. Benjamin Hamer says the course made him 'more patient and better at seeing things through'. Vivian Pham sees the reading aspect of the course as shaping a practice where 'I'm writing in multiple different forms and trying to locate ancestors in each to better orient myself: screenwriting, playwrighting, poetry and novels.' Munira Tabassum Ahmed's work has led to a novel she describes as 'an intergenerational story, told over the course of one week, about what we owe to the women before us'.

Sometimes the word elitism, coded with shade, is used about the course. This isn't the case when other achievements — athletic, monetary and so on — are celebrated. This is perhaps strange when the work of these students is so expansive and generous, and shows the ways in which what Toni Morrison called 'the vulnerability of an idea' can allow readers to think more deeply into complexity.

All this is a sliver of what I have witnessed in this course, a record of what comes of entrusting students with agency. How easy and magnificent it is *to find something beautiful in this*.

**Felicity Plunkett is a poet, critic, editor and academic. She has published three collections of poetry, most recently *A Kinder Sea* (UQP, 2020), and edited *Thirty Australian Poets* (UQP, 2011).**





## Ten well-known E2 alumni and some of their work

- Bastian Fox Phelan, *How to Be in Between* (Giramondo, 2022)
- Madeleine Gray, *Green Dot* (Allen & Unwin, 2023)
- Elias Greig, *I Can't Remember the Title but the Cover is Blue* (Allen & Unwin, 2018)
- Julie Koh, *Portable Curiosities* (UQP, 2016)
- Patrick Lenton, *Sexy Tales of Paleontology* (Me and My Girls, 2021)
- Fiona Murphy, *The Shape of Sound* (Text, 2022)
- Maya Newell, *Gayby Baby* (Marla House films, 2015)
- Vivian Pham, *The Coconut Children* (Penguin, 2020)
- Sam Twyford-Moore, *Cast Mates* (NewSouth, 2023)
- Fiona Wright, *Small Acts of Disappearance* (Giramondo, 2015)


LISMORE CITY LIBRARY

WORDS **Nic Margan**

# AFTER THE FLOOD

In early 2022, a photograph of mounds of sodden books piled outside the Lismore Library went viral. This is the story behind the photograph – the library, the disaster and the recovery.

Before the flood that inundated Lismore and the surrounding Northern Rivers in late February and early March 2022, the Lismore Library was located at the centre of the small city, in a handsome, tall, red-brick building, with glossy-white sash windows covering much of its facade. Alongside two similar buildings that are home to the Lismore Regional Gallery and the Northern Rivers Conservatorium, and the popular park which the three institutions enclose, it formed the formal cultural heart of the city.

I had long known the value of these institutions. As a child I spent many afternoons lying in a nook of the library, picking through a feast of books. In adult life, having studied for years in a larger city, this cultural precinct offered a counter-argument to the idea that moving back to a regional area meant losing touch with the literature, art and music I'd come to love.

One month before the flood hit, I started a job at Lismore Library. I was 30 years old and starting a new life, of sorts. Our first daughter had just been born, so I was spending much of that time rushing between the clothesline and the house, nappies in hand, in the on-again, off-again rain. I had finally found employment that not only fitted my love of books, but which dovetailed with my fondness for my hometown. Happiness seemed to sit like the sun on the horizon, and I hoped it was rising.

Right: Lismore streets underwater. Photo by Nic Margan

Opposite: The mountain of sodden books outside the Lismore Library. Photo by Richmond Tweed Regional Library

On the eve of the flood, I helped pack up the library. A motley crew of staff, friends and family gathered to raise everything to the higher floors. Heavy rain splattered against the windows as we worked, but it felt more like a community barbecue than preparation for a natural disaster. A bag of lolly snakes circulated, and new acquaintances were made casually, say, over the top of a bookshelf as we tried to negotiate it up a staircase. We moved all the displays, books and electronics from the ground floor to the first and second floors, trundling them along on trolleys, in and out of the lift, and then

packing all of it in between the bookshelves and the public computers. Like everyone else in town, we congratulated ourselves on being well prepared.

After finishing up, I made the short trip home. We live in a timber house from the 1950s that sits on posts 2.5 metres off the ground. It's also on the floodplain, but classified as 'flood fringe', so we didn't expect much. I pushed the mower up to the highest point under our house, stuck some concrete blocks under the washing machine and parked our cars up the street.

In the dim blue light of an overcast dawn, I saw the water moving at walking pace up the slight slope of our street. At first, I thought it was a broad puddle shimmering strangely, but after a moment I could no longer deny what I saw. Edgeless and steadily moving, it could be nothing other than water rising, fast.

A kind of watery hell arrived that morning in Lismore. Many will recall the television images of sallow, elderly people being unloaded from boats by men in rain jackets, alongside bedraggled dogs and toddlers in floaties and bike helmets. My partner and I got out over our verandah rail with our baby wrapped in towels. When we hit dry land, a friend put a jacket around me and offered us a ride up the hill. From the living room of my in-laws, we sat and watched the television images on repeat, hoping and wondering if everyone was okay.

With a six-week-old baby, an unliveable house, a post-partum partner and casual, part-time employment with a library that had just been flooded, I was one of those people feeling newly aware of the precarity of their existence that morning.

If disaster recovery is a puzzle, then one of the pieces is work. Having only been at the library for a short period, I didn't know my managers well. In the dozen shifts I'd worked, my impression of Lucy Kinsley, the Regional Library Manager for the broader Richmond Tweed Regional Library (RTRL) network, was of an easy-going and sincere person. She was unlike any top-level manager I'd ever known; she was almost always visible and working hard at something physical. The Lismore Area Librarian, Michael Lewis, appeared to be a warm and jovial person who could also be quite serious. After I'd made a joke about how eccentric one particular library patron had been, I could tell that he wasn't impressed. We were there to help the community, not be amused by them.

Each of them has a different story to tell of the disaster and the recovery that followed.

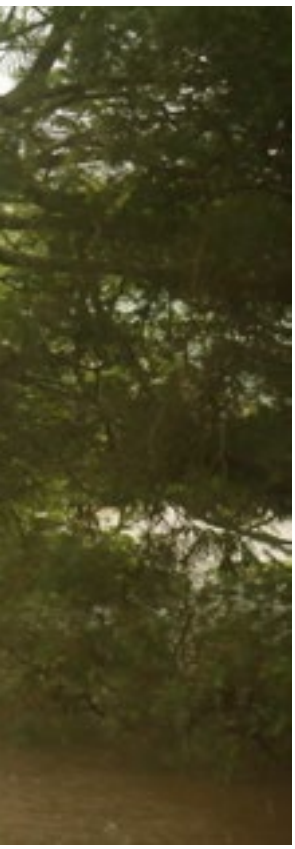
Below left: Damaged books piled up in the Lismore Library. Photo by Richmond Tweed Regional Library

Below right: Floodwaters rose as high as tree trunks in Lismore's streets. Photo by Nic Margan

**I saw the water moving at walking pace up the slight slope of our street. At first, I thought it was a broad puddle shimmering strangely, but after a moment I could no longer deny what I saw. Edgeless and steadily moving, it could be nothing other than water rising, fast.**

On the morning of the flood, Lucy had received a call from a staff member who lived in a shop-top apartment across the road from the library. It was one o'clock in the morning and the water had reached him — and the ground and first floors of the library — but not the second floor. He was on the roof of his apartment and asked whether he could go into the library to escape. Like many others, he was rescued by a stranger in a boat.

Michael points out that packing up for a flood wasn't unusual. ln his 15 years at the library he had followed the official flood plan eight times. But a plan can only account for those possibilities that have been considered; the water had never reached so high. A seatbelt won't do much if the seat drops through the floor.



'When I walked into the library after the flood,' Michael recalls, 'there was no carpet, it was just books. It was dark, it was gloomy, it stank. It was your work, your community impact, everything was on the floor in ruins.'

It wasn't any easier for Lucy, who has been working for RTRL for almost 50 years. 'It's just been hard,' she says simply, maintaining a stoic but tired smile.

They knew that after the disaster the community would need the library and quickly began to find ways to meet that need. They put donated books in the small library in the elevated suburb of Goonellabah, then opened a pop-up library, first in the lobby of the RTRL headquarters building, also in Goonellabah. Later, it was moved to a shop space in the CBD, where it remains.

'We did a lot of things,' Michael explains. 'One of them was a fines amnesty. People would come in and say, "Oh I wasn't able to save the library books." We were like, "Forget the library books, you're okay, let's get rid of the charges, don't even think about it. What would you like to borrow today?"'

For years the library had operated a mobile library service, supplying books and other items to many of the surrounding towns, like Bangalow and Nimbin. But the semitrailer used as the mobile library had also been flooded. 'In the meantime, our staff ran the service out of the back of a station wagon,' Lucy says. 'They'd load up every day, unload at each stop, pack up again, move to the next one. Then do it all again the next day for six days a week, often in the pouring rain.'

Staff established a new social program where community members were invited to participate in a range of activities and enjoy hot drinks and biscuits. This was designed purely to combat social isolation and fragmentation.

As Michael puts it, 'There are few free, open spaces available for anyone in the community to come in and learn and connect. When your home and your library have been wrecked, where do people go?'

Meanwhile, that viral image led to a massive number of donated books. In the warehouse space attached to the headquarters' office, sorting through a chest-high labyrinth of books sent to us in boxes, bags and tubs became my day job and that of many other staff and volunteers.

We sorted through brand new, hardcover editions of classic novels, instruction manuals for the George Foreman Grill (plural intended), well-loved children's books, mouldy old collections of cricketer's biographies and everything in between. Each book was assessed for quality and by genre before being re-boxed accordingly.

'Anyone and everyone was sending them. Unknown people, organisations, publishers, libraries, schools,' says Lucy. 'An organisation called 123Read2Me sent seven pallet-loads of children's books, each containing about 600 kilograms of books.'

'People would come to us who wanted to give, to share, to talk, to connect,' Michael explains. 'There would be days when you would have someone donating who's crying and you've got a staff member who's crying as well. It was cathartic. The act of giving was supporting people and could give them some power over something they felt so powerless over.'

With the sorting area almost always at capacity, Lucy and Michael hired three 40-foot shipping containers to store the sorted books.

From the series *Washed Away, the Northern Rivers Floods*. Photo by David Maurice Smith

Even now, the sound of a truck reversing rouses a little panic in me, as I recall wondering where we could possibly put more donations.

Soon, Lucy and Michael looked beyond the library. They began distributing the books elsewhere. At events and markets, staff volunteered to sell books for 10 cents each or, at times, just give them away. 'We've been able to distribute them to the YWCA, to patrons at our libraries, the Merry Markets, NAIDOC week and the lantern parade,' says Lucy. She also arranged a community book swap at Lismore Central, the local shopping centre. It proved so popular that it now has a whole shop to itself. Visitors to the swap started their own Facebook page where they review books they've found there.

'Giving away books helped us provide the feeling that Lismore is a happy space,' Lucy says. 'We're still doing it.'

From too few books, to too many books, the challenges for a library after a disaster are unpredictable. The lack of large, centrally located spaces became the next challenge. In the small space provided by the pop-up library, people studying or filling out relief forms and insurance claims were distracted by children singing at story time. The solution? Establishing a second pop-up library for children, also located in a shop space in the CBD.

Unfortunately, there is no disaster recovery instruction manual for libraries, though there is talk of writing one. Recently, Michael has been thinking

about how what we have learnt might be shared with anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves in the same position. Our approach, following Lucy's example, was to show up and do what was in front of us. Most importantly, we did it together.

As Michael says, 'It's been impossible for me to separate the personal from the professional. At times I thought, "God, it's an absolute mess." Other times I look at how our staff have come together and done this amazing service in the face of such adversity, purely to give their community that connection. There's a really positive feeling.'

Most disasters do more than disrupt normal life; they break it off at its midpoint. What was, may not return. Many people live with the sense that there is life before the disaster and life after the disaster. For me, the 'before' was the baby bubble we were in with our newborn. The town is like that too. Looking back, Lismore had a vitality that hasn't returned. There has been a significant population decline, there are goods and services you can no longer buy here and abandoned houses that are still full of mud. New question marks over the town's future arise weekly — we can only assume they will continue.

One of the things I often reflect on is what of our former cultural life will survive. Our cultural institutions are an important part of what connects us as a region to the world beyond, but also what connects the broader world to us, by equipping regional people with the means to be creators. Although the library is yet to return to its red-brick home, it's clear that our town's future has a library in it, one that has been fought for by hardworking staff and strangers alike.

The library lost around 29,000 books in the flood and received donations of over 100,000. 32,000 books have now been digitally catalogued.

'We received a substantial amount of financial help from the community across Australia,' Lucy says, 'but the fact that many of the books in our


Lucy Kinsley, Manager of the Richmond Tweed Library Network, and Lismore Area Librarian Michael Lewis distributing books. Photo by Nic Margan

libraries are given books is special. I think that has more impact than if we'd spent however many thousand dollars buying them. They would have just been normal books, but these are community books.'

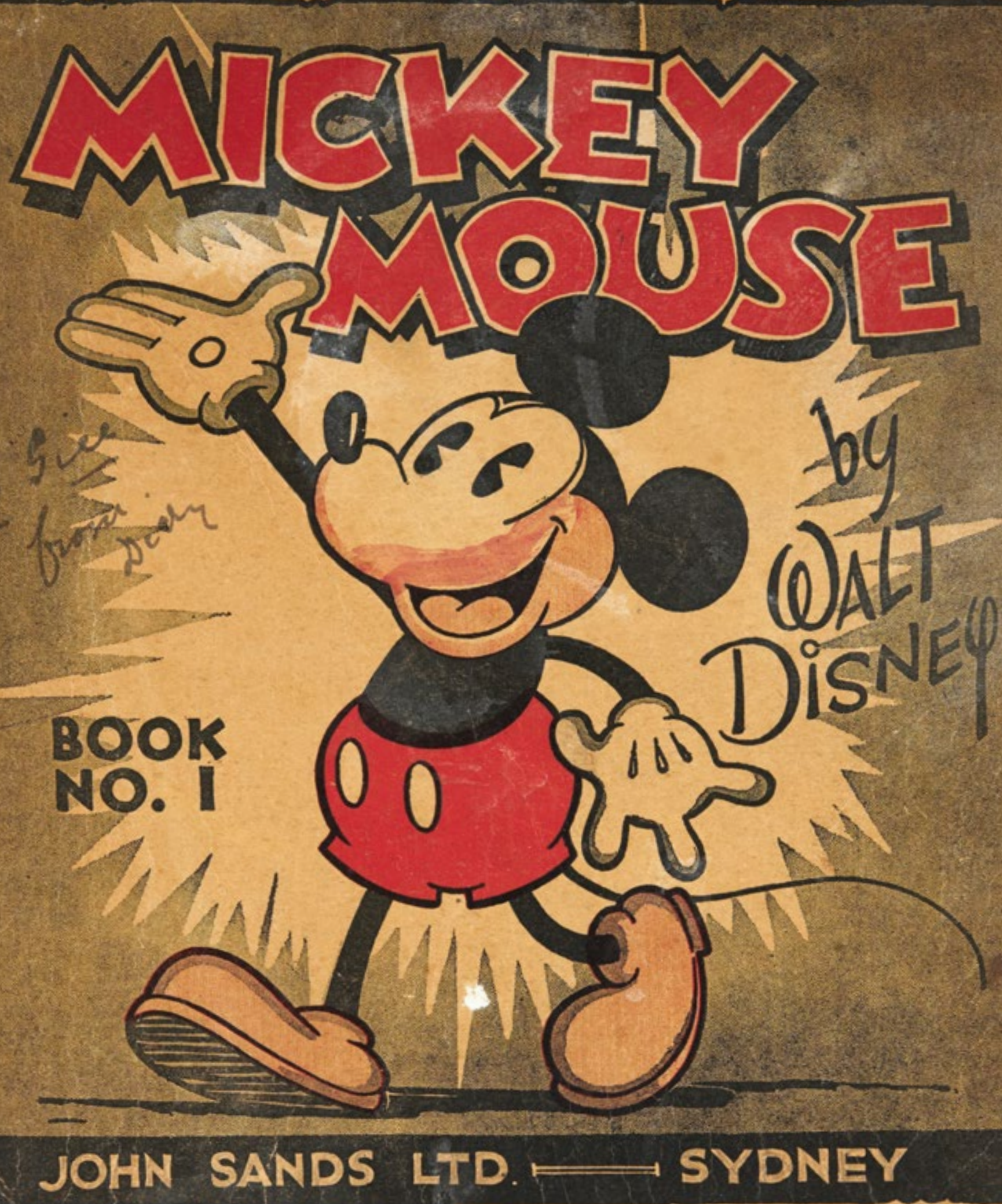
Michael, too, is looking forward. Whether it was one book or a pallet of books, many of the donations were accompanied by letters to the library, encouraging us and expressing sympathy for our loss. 'These have been collected and kept in folders. What I would like to see is a display in the Lismore Library when we get back.'

That little cabinet of notes will remain as a reminder of how moved people were by that image of the books outside the window, and of how generously they responded.

'The community is not going to be back to normal for years,' Lucy says, 'but the library will be back up and running, better than ever. The light's there and we're heading towards it. We had a flood plan, now we'll just do a new flood plan. We'll work it out. It'll be bigger and better and brighter than ever.'

**Nic Margan is a Lismore-born and based writer. He lives in a tall house on the floodplain with his partner and daughter and works in the local library. He previously worked as a firefighter in the Black Summer bushfires and became interested in writing about natural disasters. After they evacuated with their 6-week-old baby in a stranger's boat during the Lismore flood of February 2022, he and his family spent six months in temporary accommodation while making their house habitable again. He is currently working on a novel based on his experiences of natural disasters.**

# MICKEY MOUSE



by WALT DISNEY

BOOK NO. 1

JOHN SANDS LTD. — SYDNEY

WORDS **Richard Gray**

# Look at this stuff, isn't it neat?

## Revisiting the Library's collection of Disney memorabilia is like wishing on a star.

Disney celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2023, having created a well of shared childhood memories in the process. Do you remember the first time you heard Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* long to be part of our world? Or when you first followed Alice down the rabbit hole to Wonderland? Perhaps you still haven't gotten over the fate of Bambi's mother.

My earliest Disney memories come from a well-worn VHS copy of *Fantasia* (1940) and Sunday night screenings of TV's *The Wonderful World of Disney* in the early 1980s. This was appointment viewing. I can still remember the sheer terror of the Headless Horseman riding across that bridge in a cutdown version of *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mister Toad* (1949), moments before throwing his flaming pumpkin head directly at the screen.

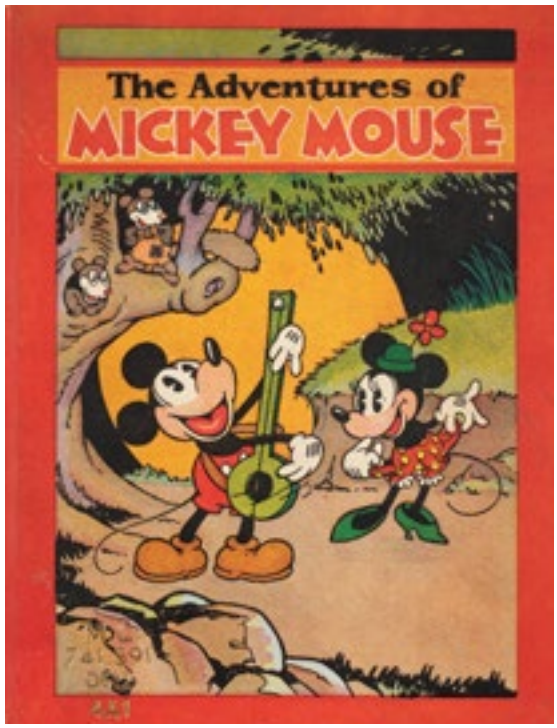
Decades later, that trauma gave way to passion and I was inspired by the centenary celebrations to revisit some of Disney's earliest short films and features. I could only wonder what it would have been like to watch those films without the weight of a century's worth of pop culture analysis.

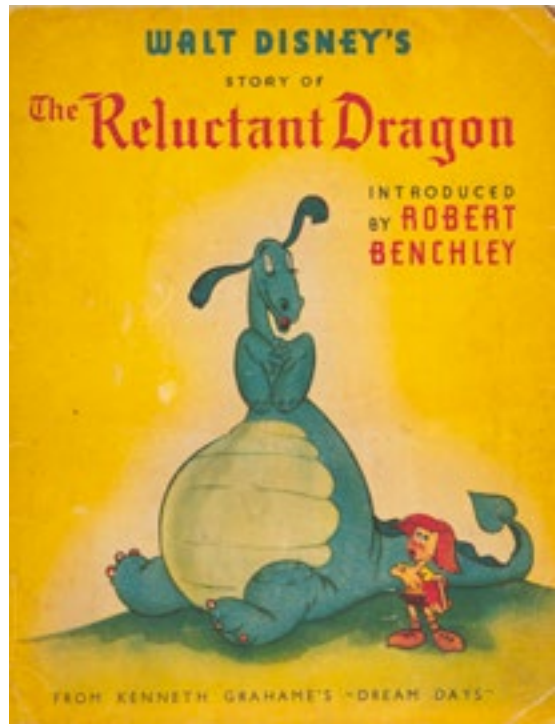
One possible answer lay in a *Pinocchio* (1940) cinema program held in the Library's collections. The program was given to Greater Union Theatre Circuit audiences during the film's local release. The Library's copy, acquired over 73 years later in 2013, has a pencil note in the corner of the cover that reads: 'Thurs 5pm, 16/5/40.' From that note we might gather that this little artefact, filled with lavish production photos and introductions, most likely sat on the lap of an audience member as they stared up at the screen on the film's opening day in Australia.

These programs were designed to make the cinema experience feel like a grand outing. *Fantasia* was constructed as a concert feature, so each page of its program — also in the collection — details a different composer, providing sketches and inspirations for the animation that accompanied the fiery visions of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* or Mickey's iconic broom battle set to Paul Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. These illustrated books were a way of extending the cinema experience beyond the screen, in the same way video featurettes, home media and websites do today.

These two program booklets are the tip of the Disney collectible iceberg. Delving into the Library's catalogue, which always feels like a trove of treasures untold, it's hard not to feel like Ariel and ask, how many wonders can one cavern hold?

Cover of *Mickey Mouse Book No. 1*, inscribed with a message from the giver. Could it be 'To Gill from Dicky'?




*The Adventures of Mickey Mouse*, 1931. by staff of Walt Disney. Courtesy of The Walt Disney Company

Cover of *The Reluctant Dragon.* Courtesy of The Walt Disney Company

## Duck soup

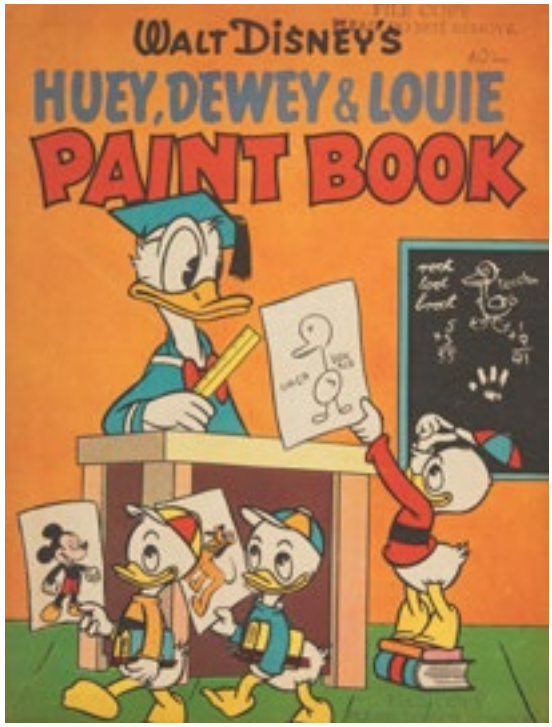
As it turns out, quite a few. It may be surprising to learn that the Library's collections of Disney materials and ephemera span almost the whole century of Disney's animation history. We tend to think of fandom as a recent phenomenon, a kind of postwar pop culture explosion encompassing everything from supermarket collectibles to daily YouTube tours of Disney theme parks. Yet fandom is far from a new phenomenon.

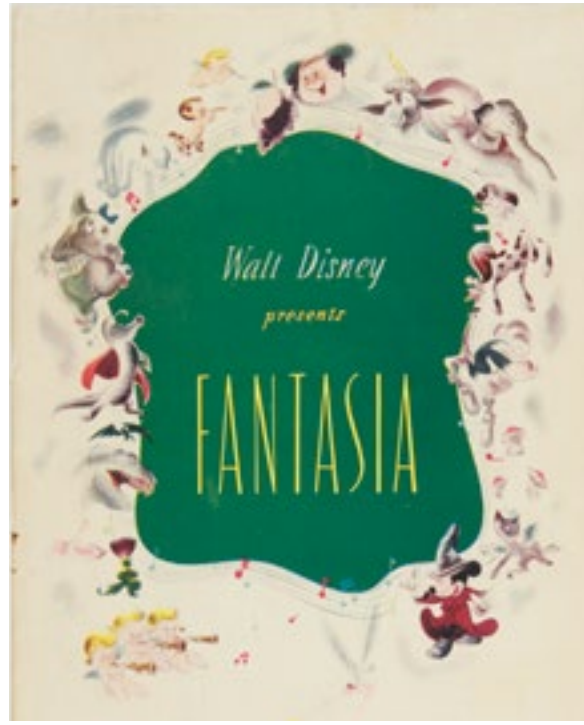
One of the Library's earliest Disney pieces is a 1931 copy of a storybook called *The Adventures of Mickey Mouse*, listed as being created 'by staff of the Walt Disney Studio'. Mickey debuted in 1928, and this first mass-market Mickey Mouse book was released at the height of his international fame. In the simple story, sold at a pre-decimal price of 2/6 (or about $13 in today's money), Mickey throws a party for his friends Carolyn Cow and Henry Horse — as well as someone named Donald Duck. Everyone's favourite irascible waterfowl wouldn't appear in movies for another two years, which makes this reprint from local publisher Angus & Robertson a rare treat indeed. A review from the Orange *Leader* newspaper of 25 September 1931 calls the book the 'newest kind of storybook' promising that 'Mickey and his multitude of friends are found here just as they are on screen. Children will prize this book beyond all others.' The *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* added a few days later on 30 September, that 'there should be a big demand for it with Christmas in the offing.'

Many other Disney publications from the 1930s and 1940s are John Sands reprints of US material. The company has a long relationship with Australian fandom — John Sands and Thomas Kenny founded Sands and Kenny in Sydney in 1851. The firm later changed its name to Sands, Kenny & Co, before becoming John Sands Ltd. Sands was known for reprinting and licensing many pop culture icons in Australia, right through to Hasbro's Transformers and My Little Pony toys and games in the 1980s and 1990s.

A particularly interesting John Sands reprint is the innocuously titled *Mickey Mouse: Book No. 1*, from 1932. Printed in Sydney, it's a collection of comic book stories and strips that often appeared in newspapers. These compilations are commonplace nowadays, and the internet provides us with archival copies of strips, but this book — along with a companion published two years later — was a chance to have them all in one spot. The Library's copies are well loved, with one inscribed with what looks like 'To Gill from Dicky' on the cover. Perhaps it was Gill who added the artistic flair to these black and white strips by colouring the first few pages for us to enjoy almost a century later.

A handful of Walt Disney paint books, or colouring books as we would call them today,




Left: Cinema program for *Fantasia*, 1940. Courtesy of The Walt Disney Company

*Far left: Huey, Dewey and Louie Paint Book*. Courtesy of The Walt Disney Company

remain untouched by tiny pencils. Some of these paint books highlight specific characters, such as Donald Duck or Johnny Appleseed. The most beautiful example from the collection comes from *Fantasia*.

Another firm, Ayers and James Pty Ltd, published large trifold cards with storybook versions of famous cartoons on one side, and counting games and puzzles on the other. One of these is a wonderfully illustrated piece that allows young readers to count from one dog (Pluto, of course) through to ten kittens, naturally clocking seven dwarfs along the way.

Along the same line of interactivity is a *Mickey Mouse Picture Album*, published by Pick-Me-Up Condiment Co from Newtown in Sydney. Inside, Mickey and Minnie espouse the virtues of tinned goods. Collectors are given space to paste the Disney labels they collected from soup cans. If you've been driven crazy trying to collect Ooshies or small cards from your weekly shop at Coles or Woolworths, imagine how many tins of soup or spaghetti you'd have to get through to fill the book. In July 1936, the PMU company took out a full-page ad in *The Sunday Sun and Guardian* asking kids to send in those labels and pledge for the 'Pick-Me-Up Mickey Mouse Club' and 'do my best to keep the promises of Mickey Mouse'. Members got a certificate, a club badge, and — perhaps best of all for dashing young fans — a discount on a Mickey Mouse blazer at Sydney retailer Mark Foys.

## From features to the front line

Before Disney's first feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was released in late 1937, spectators were quick to label it 'Walt's Folly'. Who would want to watch a cartoon that went for over 80 minutes? Lots of people, it turned out: it rapidly became the most successful sound film of all time, at least until *Gone with the Wind* two years later.

Publishers rushed to capitalise on its success, and the Library holds several examples of the books they put out, including *Walt Disney's Animals from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Walt Disney's Dopey: He Don't Talk None!*, both from 1938. Released around the same time as the international theatrical release of the feature film, the Library's copy of *Walt Disney's Sketch Book* is a pure visual delight. Before animation was thoroughly considered to be an art form, this book proves the point, filled as it is with text, sketches, early concept designs and gorgeous mounted colour photos of the main characters.

When the world went to war in 1939, Disney and many other major studios gave over their production time and creativity to government agencies in the name of the war effort. Between 1941 and 1944, about half Disney's cinematic output was educational and propaganda shorts aimed at either the public or the armed forces. One of the earliest was a promotional film called *The Thrifty Pig* (1941), a reworking of Disney's megahit *The Three Little Pigs* (1933), which replaced the Practical Pig's house of bricks with Canadian War Bonds.


Above: The Disney Derby game. Courtesy of The Walt Disney Company

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Cover of *The Gremlins*, by Flight Lieutenant Roald Dahl, who would go on to become extremely famous. Courtesy of The Walt Disney Company

From Greater Union Cinema's program for the movie *Pinocchio*, Courtesy of The Walt Disney Company

*Thrifty Pig Says* jigsaw puzzle. Courtesy of The Walt Disney Company

*Mickey Mouse Picture Album*. Courtesy of the Walt Disney Company

**Characters depicted in this article are trademarks of The Walt Disney Company.**

We find in the Library collections a jigsaw puzzle based on *The Thrifty Pig*, one of three such puzzles printed by Sands during the war. As in the cartoon, the 120-piece puzzle depicts the Big Bad Wolf in a Nazi uniform. The Three Little Pigs aren't having it, waving their Union Jack flag in front of their home. 'Who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? / The Union Jack's still waving / Who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf / If you lend your savings!' Billed as a 'young peoples' jigsaw', one imagines parents could only hear the kids singing that familiar song so many times before giving in and buying war bonds.

Throughout the war, we see images of fandom undiminished by home front restrictions. As books and films for *Bambi* and *Dumbo* were released and rereleased by Sands, children continued to engage with pop culture. We see images of children outside the Enmore Theatre in Sydney in 1942 holding posters advertising Walt Disney's behind the scenes feature, *The Reluctant Dragon*. They can play along at home with *The Disney Derby game*, using cardboard figures and coils to 'race' Mickey, Pluto, Donald and the Practical Pig. Be warned: according to the game's stern instructions, 'players pulling the cord instead of winding are disqualified.'

One book the Library holds from this era is *The Gremlins: A Royal Air Force story* by none other than Flight Lieutenant Roald Dahl. The beloved author's very first book for children, with illustrations from an uncredited Disney animators Bill Justice and Al Dempster, depicts those titular critters spotted by RAF pilots drilling holes on the wings of their planes. Intended for film production but dropped before completion, paper shortages meant that only 50,000 copies of this book were printed in the US, with an additional 30,000 in Australia. In the Library copy, there's an inscription on the half-title page that simply reads: 'To dear Jimmy, with lots of love from John and Joan, Dec. 1944.' Less than a year later, the war was over and the planes came back to earth.

## A great big, beautiful tomorrow

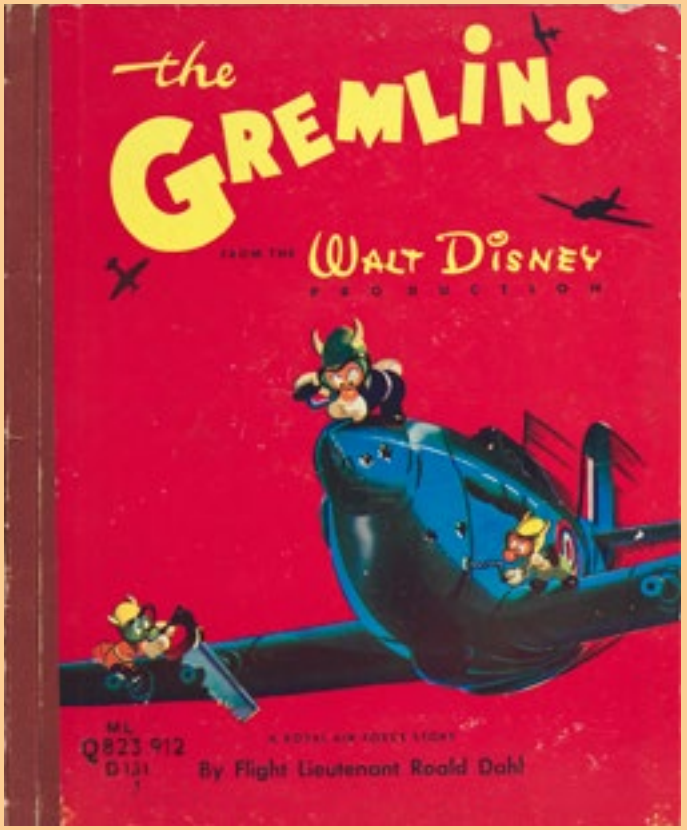
The story of Disney and collecting continues long after the Second World War. Robert D Feild wrote in his 1942 study, *The Art of Walt Disney*, 'Underlying the old adage that there is nothing new under the sun is the implication that everything as we know it has its roots in the past.' This was never more true than with the art of Walt Disney.

From *Fantasia* to *Frozen*, fandom finds new audiences and countless collectibles for the masses. In summer 2023, I can report that Disney Cruises visited our shores for the first time — that kid watching TV in the 1980s could not have believed his luck as he stepped on deck. Perhaps in another 100 years there will be someone else — apart from me — sorting through the Library's whozits and whatzits galore in time for Disney's 200th birthday celebrations.

Until then, M–I–C — see you real soon. K–E–Y — Why? Because we like you. M–O–U–S–E.

***This article is dedicated to Nikki Millington, a valued State Library colleague and Disney superfan, who passed away in July this year. To quote her favourite film,* Cinderella, *'Have courage and be kind.'***

**Richard Gray is a Coordinator in Reader Services**


the GREMLINS
FROM THE WALT DISNEY PRODUCTION
Q823.912
D121
By Flight Lieutenant Roald Dahl


WALT DISNEY'S THRIFTY PIG SAYS
WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD WOLF?
THE UNION JACKS STILL WAVING
WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD WOLF
IF YOU LEND YOUR SAVINGS!


MICKEY MOUSE
PICTURE
ALBUM
PRETTY GOOD-EH ?!

# ACTION!

## A new exhibition places the filmmakers who document or recreate war zones on the other side of the camera.

In the movie-theatre light of the Australian War Memorial exhibition, *Action! Film & War*, a short documentary called *Behind the Camera* plays on a loop. Australian combat cinematographer Andy Taylor tells an unseen interviewer, 'When you start your career, you have a little checklist in your mind of the things you want to do and achieve.' Taylor appears surprised as he recounts the various dramatic events that have punctuated his working life. 'I've been kidnapped, arrested by the KGB, stoned, punched, attacked, shot at,' he says, almost as if he was crossing items off his wish list.

*Behind the Camera* includes contributions from 11 Australian cinematographers who have reported from war zones. Among them is David Brill, who has covered various wars in which Australia has been involved, from Vietnam to Afghanistan. Brill says that when he is filming through the lens of his camera, he feels as if he is watching television while he is making television. At some level, he believes that nothing bad can happen to him because he is not really there.

Other cinematographers speak of a similar sense of separation. Their equipment insulates rather than involves them. Most of the time, they don't consider themselves to be a part of the scene, they are simply trying to fit it into a frame.

Traditionally, cinematographers are storytellers: in *Action!*, they are the story. Or, at least, they are a part of it.

*Action!* is an ambitious exhibition, curated by Daniel Eisenberg and Jen Selby of the AWM, which seeks to cover a lot of ground. It shows Australian cinematographers as journalists, historians, propagandists and fabulists — the divide is often not as stark as you might think.

Each of Australia's wars since Federation has been filmed, using successive generations of rapidly evolving equipment, examples of which are lined up for inspection at the start of the exhibition. In this peculiar context, the cameras themselves take on a martial aspect. Eisenberg says this is deliberate.

'The camera is very much a weapon,' he explains. 'What you record, what you distribute, what you show, does have power and can change how things play out. And it's been used like that, passively or actively, over history.'

The exhibition, which involves several screens showing discrete presentations simultaneously (although visitors should have little difficulty hearing one over another), refers to film that has often been used by the media as footage of the Gallipoli landings in 1915. In flickering, faltering, blurry black and white, hordes of diggers pour from landing crafts under enemy fire, rushing for the hills, while all around their comrades fall wounded and dead in the sand.

'It's the best bit of imagery we've got of men in uniform running up a beach,' says Eisenberg. However, the beach is not Gallipoli but Tamarama, in Sydney. And the sequence is not documentary footage, it is excerpted from the hugely popular 1915 feature film, *The Hero of the Dardanelles*.

'That went into archives,' says Eisenberg, 'and, because there's no footage of the landing, it became representative of the landing. But when it becomes replicated and replicated enough, it ends up entering the popular lexicon as the real thing.'

But *The Hero of the Dardanelles* was filmed only weeks after the events in Turkey, using AIF recruits from the army training camp at Liverpool — footage of their training is genuine. Nor was it unalloyed theatrical entertainment: it was used as a recruitment tool by the Australian Army, which toured the movie around the country to encourage young men to sign up.

ARTICLE

WORDS **Mark Dapin**

Private David McErlane filming the players at Beirut football ground in Lebanon in 1940. Photo by Damien Parer AWM 009382


And it is far from unique in its ambiguity. 'There's a great shot in the Memorial's collection of troops running into a fog,' says Eisenberg. 'It has a real "going-over-the-top" feel to it. That bit of footage is from a training film: the shot that comes afterwards is them walking back out.

'Sometimes the action is faked but all the elements are true. In some cases, it's as close as we get to a truthful record.' The troops in training were bound for the front. 'I'm sure a lot of them fought and died sometime later,' he says.

First World War footage, in particular, tends to be staged, as it was logistically difficult to film from the trenches. 'You can't set up a big wooden tripod camera over the top,' says Eisenberg. 'For a start, a large object on a tripod, that has a lens that reflects the light, from a distance, looks like a weapon.' Even 'true' documentary footage is not created in a vacuum. 'You still choose when to roll,' says Eisenberg, 'when to stop filming, where to point the camera; there's always a certain element of interpretation.'

In *Action!* the Second World War is represented by the work of men such as Frank Hurley and Damien Parer. In the First World War, Hurley was notorious for creating composite still images, and his movie work as an official photographer in the Middle East may not be a straightforward representation of events at Bardia and Tobruk, either. 'I wouldn't be surprised if there were sequences that were more directed than not,' says Eisenberg.

Parer was the official movie photographer to the 2nd AIF, and his patriotic documentary

**'I've been kidnapped, arrested by the KGB, stoned, punched, attacked, shot at.'**

*Kokoda Front Line!* won Australia's first Academy Award. He was killed in action in Palau in September 1944, one of several cinematographers featured in the exhibition who met a similar fate. Parer's papers are held at the State Library of NSW, along with a gunmetal copy of the Oscar plaque.

Most of the footage of fighting during the two World Wars is monochrome, heightening the feeling that mechanised destruction ought to be in black and white. In colour, it should be intolerable to watch.

Like any other able-bodied young man, a career cinematographer might be a civilian one day and a soldier the next: a handful of conscript camera operators were posted to the Australian Army in Vietnam during the national service scheme of 1964–1972.

I have written a book on the 'nasho' experience, but I found there was much I didn't know in the exhibition's short section about nasho cinematographers, who went to the Vietnam War as publicists and propagandists.

More familiar were the stories of war correspondents such as Neil Davis, who once travelled with the Viet Cong (and was later killed filming a coup attempt in Bangkok). Despite misleading stories spread by Australian Army

Above left: Filmmaker Benjamin Gilmour at work making his film *Jirga*

Above right: Members of 1st Joint Public Affairs Unit Deployed Field Team. Lt Kris Gardiner and ABPH Paul Berry, working on the gunline at FOB Armadillo, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2008. Photo courtesy of Department of Defence, Corporal Andrew Hetherington

Army Defence Photographer Warrant Officer Class 2 Al Green filming on the main streets of Dili, East Timor during INTERFET, 1999. Image courtesy of the Department of Defence. Photographer unknown 2012 0621adf00000_010A

officers about journalists covering the war from the balconies of their Saigon hotels, a cinematographer such as Davis would have seen more fighting — and been exposed to greater danger — than almost any digger in Vietnam.

As the exhibition moves into more recent times, it touches on the problems faced by correspondents who cannot hope to reach Davis' ideal of neutrality — cinematographers 'embedded' with the military in the Middle East, for example, whose host units both transport and protect them. However, the work of war correspondents is not the only film to come back home from Afghanistan. 'Home movies' shot by ordinary soldiers have been common since the Vietnam War, but Australian veterans of the war in Afghanistan often kept — and shared — helmet-cam footage of house-to-house operations that make war look like a frenzied, frenetic video game. Returned servicepeople watch themselves and their mates on laptops, tablets and smartphones, the stars of their own war movies.

I've been shown footage like this before, on desktop computers in veterans' homes, and it can be dizzyingly confronting. 'There is an immediacy,' explains Eisenberg. 'The camera is at eye level. Both hands are free, which means things — like a weapon — can come into shot.'

Just as every declared war has been filmed, most have also been dramatised too, from the Boer War, in director Bruce Beresford's myth-making *Breaker Morant*, to the so-called 'War on Terror' in my friend Benjamin Gilmour's ultra-low-budget *Jirga*.

*Action!* displays movie props, including a sparkling dress worn in the musical *The Sapphires* and the traditional Afghan *perahan tunban* adopted by Gilmour when he filmed his drama in Afghanistan.

**Traditionally, cinematographers are storytellers: in *Action!*, they are the story.**


At first, it's a bit disturbing to see artefacts from works of fiction alongside the relics of war. However, Eisenberg says the curators had always planned to include the dress from *The Sapphires*. 'Being a film historian, I want to tell the historical story,' he says. 'But when you say to people, "We're doing an exhibition on war and film," almost inevitably, someone says, "Oh, like Peter Weir's *Gallipoli*." And I think it's part of the story about how the moving image has informed how we understand conflict.'

But what is a 'war film'? The definition adopted by the AWM's exhibition seems uncommonly broad. '*Sapphires* is a musical comedy,' says Eisenberg. 'And, more than anything, it's about the Stolen Generation, but a key element is also about them going to Vietnam. And people identify that as a war film.'

Eisenberg says the movies are positioned 'not in competition with the archive, but in contrast'. Such juxtaposition raises complex questions. A caption beside Gilmour's notebooks and costumes quotes the filmmaker as saying, 'I love making the audience feel as though they're not quite sure whether they're watching a documentary or a drama.'

I call Gilmour to ask him why. He says that he believes that realism has more emotional impact, but that what he most hoped to achieve with *Jirga* was to 'propose an idea to the audience about what was possible around post-conflict restorative justice — this possibility of healing a relationship between the occupiers and the enemy'.

Therefore, he says, he was initially puzzled to be approached about being included in the exhibition. 'I saw the film as an *anti*-war film that explored the negative impact of war on both civilians and combatants. You have a traumatised veteran returning to find some peace for himself, and traumatised Afghans sharing their story and their perspective with him. So I was surprised that the AWM wanted to include that, and I think it says a lot about the nuances that they're aware of around war.'

The nuances in Gilmour's working practices are rare in Australian filmmaking. While the exhibition's captions note that Gilmour and his crew in Kandahar Province were protected from the Taliban by the Afghan National Army, Gilmour says that he later discovered that he was also being protected by the Taliban from local Daesh (ISIS) forces.

In their different ways, Gilmour's style of guerilla filmmaking (if that is not too tasteless a construction) and the veterans' helmet-cam footage point to the future of combat cinematography. Big budgets and expensive equipment are no longer necessary. Today, anyone with an iPhone can make a war movie.

While there may not be another generation of the likes of Neil Davis, David Brill or Ginny Stein — one of relatively few female correspondents in *Behind the Camera* — we can be sure of one thing: there will still be plenty of wars to film.

***Action! Film & War*, an Australian War Memorial touring exhibition, runs until 28 April 2024.**

**Mark Dapin, a regular *Openbook* contributor, is a novelist, historian, true crime writer, journalist and screenwriter. Among his books are *The Nasho's War: Australia's national servicemen and Vietnam* (2017) and *Australia's Vietnam War: Myth vs History* (2019).**

Above: Former ABC journalist Ginny Stein covering the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia. Stein had been in Sri Lanka on holidays when the tsunami struck and she began filing from there for SBS World News, before returning to Thailand where she was based. She later flew to Aceh, where she filed daily for the next fortnight.

Opposite: 411358 Sergeant Christopher John Bellis (left), a Department of Public Relations (DPR) Cinematographer, filming in a crowded street in a village in Vietnam. Standing next to him holding a microphone is 2784120 Lieutenant David Walter Brown, also a DPR Photographer. Australian War Memorial PO3283.002


NGUYÊN
MỸ-KÝ

WORDS **Deborah Lee-Talbot**

# An archivist's archives

## The Pacific treasures of former Mitchell Librarian Phyllis Mander-Jones reveal something of Australia's ongoing relationship with the islands.

Top: Portrait of Phyllis Mander-Jones

Bottom: Watercolour of waratahs by Phyllis Mander-Jones

Phyllis Mander-Jones' papers, in which I have been immersing myself, make it clear that she was fascinated by Australasian waters and lands during the first part of the twentieth century. Occasionally, she booked passage on a Pacific cruise ship. At other times, her travels were intellectual and professional, a process of finding answers for other researchers or acquiring the manuscripts of colonial naturalist Sir Joseph Banks for the State Library of NSW collection. Evidence of her travels endures at the Library today in her extensive collection of watercolour paintings, sketch maps, photographs, ephemera, lino prints and journals.

Mander-Jones journey as a record-keeper and curator began in the early twentieth century. Her early education at Abbotsleigh, a private school for girls on Sydney's upper North Shore, instilled a lifelong love of drawing, literature, languages, history and community. I was amused, though, to find that as a child she didn't see the value of keeping a journal. A 1909 attempt at a diary, when she was 11, reveals her attitude:

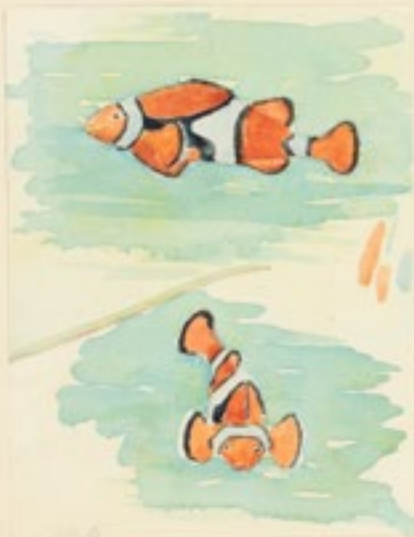
> It was just as I was finishing practising [the piano] this evening that it took hold of me it was a pity I hadn't written more in this book. The fact is I have a violent prejudice against diaries, some of course are interesting but I was sure mine would be one of the milk and water kind in which the author solemnly writes down that on such and such a date she went to a party and on such and such a date went away for a holiday — facts not at all interesting for future reference.

A decade later, that youthful distaste for record keeping disappeared when Mander-Jones started her library career. She joined the Public Library of NSW (now the State Library) in 1925, soon after graduating from the University of Sydney with a Bachelor of Arts. It is likely that the Mitchell Library, founded in 1910 to specialise in Australian content, was a great attraction for her.

Mander-Jones explained in a 1983 interview with Baiba Berzins that the principal librarian, Henry Anderson, chose to employ many women in the early days of the Mitchell Library. The library culture fostered intellectual brilliance — according to Sylvia Martin, biographer of Mander-Jones' colleague Ida Leeson — as several female staff members came from upper-class families so had received a university education. As a member of the prominent David Jones and William Arnott families, and a passionate intellectual, Mander-Jones fitted this description.

At the Library she was trained to assist readers with research, curate a reading collection and create exhibitions. The Library's annual reports for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show that the collection was acquired through 'valuable exchanges and donations from foreign [European] countries'. Materials concerning explorers, surveyors, philosophy and literature formed the foundation of the collection. Further acquisitions and donations established a collection focused on Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific Islands by the

The Papuan Chief from the verandah at Ogobada



The Church at Ogobada

'Bring your sketching things, camera and good supply of films and Nepera glossy gas-light paper'


time Mander-Jones occupied the role of qualified librarian in 1932.

Around this time, family connections took this Sydney librarian to Mailu, a Papuan island more than 2500 kilometres, as the crow flies, to the north. Letters from Mander-Jones to her mother, and from her aunt Annie, show that a family friend, missionary William Saville, arranged for her to holiday in Papua. Saville was a London Missionary Society member who had arrived in Mailu in March 1901. There is no indication that Mander-Jones was an active member of the Missionary Society, but Saville welcomed her regardless. 'Bring your sketching things, camera and good supply of films and Nepera glossy gas-light paper,' he wrote in a letter dated 18 February 1932. 'We can develop here and print at night by lamp light. I do hope dear girl, you will have a thundering good holiday.'

**Evidence of her travels endures at the Library today in her extensive collection of watercolour paintings, sketch maps, photographs, ephemera, lino prints and journals.**

Mander-Jones' attempts to document her stay in Mailu were not always successful. She tells her mother in a letter on 22 April 1932 that she and Saville tried to develop a film, but 'it is a failure. [A]ll blistered by the heat. We are going to try again at night when the land breeze has cooled down the air.' Perhaps this is why only a few photographs from this time appear in the collection.

She had more luck with a traditional, paper-based approach. On 7 April 1932, when she departed from Walsh Bay, Papua, aboard the *Macdhui*, she started keeping a journal of her experiences. Soon after her arrival in Port Moresby, she described a typical workday and observed local fashions. Papuans were, she said:

> employed in the town both in clerical and manual work and are continually passing through the hot glaring streets. Groups of native girls and children sit about in patches of shade ... The girls wear grass petticoats and both they and the boys are fond of decorating their hair and arm bands with flowers — brilliant red oleander, hibiscus — yellow and orange flowers.

Mander-Jones fulfilled her intention to 'record with care the gentle people of Mailu'. Among three months of almost daily journal entries are lino prints and a sketch map bound into the volume. These illustrations by Mander-Jones show Mailu people — including many women — at work, hunting, creating pots and caring for children. Even the children of the mission had daily tasks. She writes:

> A boy cooks [for] the boys and a girl the girls. Everything is boiled in the Mailu fashion ... Then the food is dished onto individual plates and they set round on the grass to eat. The chief item is rice — but they have plenty of sago, sweet potato, yam and Taro and everything is flavoured with cocoa nut.

These mundane descriptions were countered by the inclusion of beautiful embroidery and paintings. Even the journal's grey cover is embroidered with yellow and red thread to create a striking pattern representing local winds. The inside pages, lightweight and transparent, contain typed descriptions and comments. The content is split into two distinct sections. The first is an account that blends ethnography with personal experiences.

The second half is a more lighthearted account of a tropical getaway full of games and afternoon teas. This is where she includes observations of white settlers like the Territory administrator Hubert Murray. After travelling to the mainland, Mander-Jones wrote about being charmed by Papuans:

> Mr. Saville went over to Isuleilei in the morning so was not at hand when the students came up led by the Samoan teacher, with presents for the guests of the college. There were fowls and vegetables and fruit, and some of the women brought native string bags and one a grass petticoat dyed in the Port Moresby fashion. It was a wonderful reception.

These bound pages lack the battered, stained look you might expect from a well-travelled journal exposed to Papua's humidity as its writer toured along the south-eastern coast. This suggests,

Above: Embroidered cover of Phyllis Mander-Jones' journal

Opposite: Lino block prints by Phyllis Mander-Jones

perhaps, she wrote a rough diary while travelling and then transcribed her reflections into this presentation format. Given Mander-Jones' devotion to sending letters to family and friends while travelling, and the inconsistent postal service in Papua, the journal was probably created as a vibrant, informative record to be shared.

After returning to the Library she continued her training in research and modern librarianship. When the Second World War started in 1939, she again became involved with Papua. Prompted by the requirements of war strategists, in 1942 Ida Leeson, the Mitchell Librarian and a mentor of Mander-Jones, was directed by the Allied Geographical Section to provide, according to biographer Sylvia Martin, 'all essential facts regarding books, journals, maps, charts' about Australasia. This included gathering information about the London Missionary Society in Papua, as its missions were believed to be in the pathway of pending Japanese invasion.

This engagement with Papua was an experience that also brought Mander-Jones closer to the war. In a *Daily Telegraph* article ten years later, she described receiving 'orders to collect everything we could lay hands on about certain areas in the Pacific region. We knew this meant an attack on certain islands, or plans for bigger things, such as the invasion of South-east Asian mainland.' Supervised by Leeson, she 'dug up photos which showed the coastline, descriptions of islands, maps, charts, and books on every aspect of the Pacific'. Involvement with the war effort reinforced the librarians' awareness that they needed to locate and preserve Pacific records as much as Australian materials.

After she was appointed Mitchell Librarian in November 1946, Mander-Jones' continued to draw on her earlier experiences. She became a guide to the Pacific for Australian researchers, as her letters to her mother and sister Mildred show. She toured Pacific islands such as Tahiti to acquire material for the people of NSW and also travelled to South America and the United States. There she attended diplomatic posts including the Australian Embassy in Washington, and the shared British Embassy–Australian Consulate in Santiago, Chile, where she was granted access to collections in the Biblioteca Nacional and the Archivo Nacional.

She wrote to her mother and sister that she had found 'all the documents of Pacific interest which I could trace through the catalogues are copies of originals in Spain'. When considering further research opportunities, she explained that gaining records about the Pacific for Australian researchers was an ongoing job because:

> [t]here will be other material in the US to copy. E.g. some missionary records at Harvard. I do not know if it has been decided that there should be cooperation between M.L [Mitchell Library] and National Library in copying here. I thought it advisable, however, to make enquiries while I was here.

Phyllis Mander-Jones' legacy is often thought to be her 1972 publication *Manuscripts of the British Isles Relating to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific*. This is certainly a long-lasting and much-appreciated gift to researchers. Looking at her papers in the Library, however, it has become clear to me that her engagement with the Pacific was much more than a catalogue of archival records. It was, for her, a place of curiosity and artistic development.

**Dr Deborah Lee-Talbot is the Library's 2023 CH Currey Fellow.**

WORDS **Anna Funder**

# The Libraries That Made Me

My first experience of a library was at seven, when we moved back to Melbourne from Paris. Standing among unpacked boxes and cases, my mother said, 'Let's leave all this. I'm taking you kids on a walk, to a surprise.' My brothers and I followed Mum, walking what seemed like a long way — I know it's only a few blocks now — to the local library, in Carlton. In the entry there was a box of kittens being given away — Mum had seen a flyer. We chose a sweet black one and called him Minou (puss), and we children whispered secrets in his ear all his life. He kept them.

We probably took home books as well. Books too, contained all kinds of secrets between the covers, ones that were shared between you and the writer, ones that the world didn't tell you out loud. I have marvelled at, and in, libraries all my life. The hum of intense reading that thickens the air. The idea that whatever local library you're in, a kind, soft-shoed librarian will, after only a few quiet words, bespoke fit you with the book you need. More, they will find any book from anywhere in the world and call it in, by mail or bus or train or plane, just for you. It's as if, in their capable hands, any aspect of the world, past or present, can be sifted and sorted, all Dewey-numbered and delivered — for free.

It shocks me that libraries haven't always been like this everywhere, for everyone, as a right. Of course I know that long ago barely anyone could read, that knowledge was locked up like powerful drugs, contraband or spells, in monasteries. But it's so relatively recent — only from the late 1800s — that the campaigns for free universal education, and free libraries, have led us to where we are now.

One of the most beautiful libraries I've ever seen was one of the earliest of these, the Staatliche Bibliothek at Neuburg an der Donau, in Bavaria. The collection started during the 'secularisation' period in Germany from the early 1800s, when books from monasteries and convents were taken and made available to the people. It is housed in a magnificent, double-height baroque oval room, with a walkway all around the rim of the first floor. The ceiling is gilded and gold angels watch over everything, as if to bless knowledge, imagination, incunabula.

As a student in West Berlin in the 1980s, I worked at the breathtaking Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, a 1960s Hans Scharoun–designed building erected in the lee of the Berlin Wall. Inside, the spaces are open, airy, as if to leave room for thought to soar. The feeling I had in there seems, in retrospect, to be the essential feeling I get in all libraries, old or new, local or grand, and it is defined, again, by an angel. Not in gilded wood this time but in the shape of a real man, actor Bruno Ganz — liquid brown eyes, hangdog handsome — in an overcoat. In Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*, Ganz's angel haunts this library. Invisible to the people studying or reading at the desks, he approaches them and listens in on their thoughts, worries, hopes. He is the essence of attention and compassion.

Back at university in Melbourne, I got one of the best jobs of my student days in the English Department Library. It sounds prehistoric now, but I sat at the front desk, typing out index cards for new acquisitions or requests from staff for books or journals — anything from the latest novel, to psychoanalysis, poetry or medieval studies. I read things that had nothing to do with my studies: a smorgasbord of serendipity. Despite my time there, I have never understood the Dewey decimal system: how can numbers tell you what a book is, to a decimal point?

But the library that most made me was the Baillieu, at Melbourne University. A multistorey building, the Baillieu Library had every book you could want and many more, and carrels where everyone studied, piles of books and notebooks next to them. My most profound memories are not of finding what Dewey told me I was looking for, but the excitement of finding what was next to it: things you'd never find if you followed only reason, or numbers, or an algorithm. Almost 40 years later see that I have been fruitfully sidetracked my whole life.

The best thing I came across in there I wasn't looking for either. He was in another carrel, reading architecture books. Utterly unclassifiable, I have had him out ever since, on long-term loan.

**Anna Funder is the author of *Stasiland* (2003), which won the Samuel Johnson Prize, and *All That I Am* (2011), which won the Miles Franklin Award. Her most recent book is *Wifedom* (2023).**

WORDS Scott Wajon

# The Galloping Gourmet rides again

In the late 1970s I left home, ill equipped for most things in life, including cooking. Building on my after-school repertoire of fish fingers, or occasionally fried Spam, wrapped in soft white bread, I could deliver a delicious Apricot Chicken (the three-ingredient version — ask me for the recipe) or a salmon quiche with uncooked pastry. Even by the low standards of student share houses, these culinary efforts did not impress my flatmates.

Uncooked pastry haunted me for decades: my own, reliably disappointing, and that of the meat pies from the old-school suburban cake shops I furtively frequented. This was before any national 'Best Pie' competition which, it seems, are always won by bakeries hundreds of miles away from where I live. It's a long way to the shop ...

Had I actually paid attention to Graham Kerr in the early 1970s, I could have saved myself decades of embarrassment. Kerr's first television show, *The Galloping Gourmet*, aired between 1969 and 1973. I was probably too young to take much in, so perhaps my memories are conflated with reruns of the show after 1975, when Australia first got colour television.

Kerr was one of the first celebrity TV chefs. He was witty, self-deprecating, flamboyant and risqué for the time, sort of a cross between Simon Templar, John Cleese and comedian Dave Allen. Boyishly handsome and immaculately dressed, he started each episode leaping over chairs — a glass of wine in hand that never spilt — before he perched on a barstool for his introductory monologue.

Given my already established appreciation of a good pie, when I found a 1966 first edition of *The Graham Kerr Cookbook*, by the Galloping Gourmet in the Library's collection, I was inspired to cook his Parramatta Chicken Pie. I wonder why the dish was so named? Perhaps for its alliterative appeal — other recipes in the book are for Fairfield Flounder Fillets and Potts Point Fish Pot. I'd rather think it was a nod to William Francis King, the Flying Pieman, whose 'feats of pedestrianism' in the 1840s saw him outrun the ferry from Sydney, where he sold pies to passengers as they embarked, to arrive at Parramatta in time to sell more pies to disembarking passengers.

## Parramatta Chicken Pie

**Recipe to produce 6 portions**
(In the book measurements are given in USA, imperial and metric but only the latter are reproduced here.)

Chicken meat .5 kilos
Water 230 millileters [I'm typing this as it's written]
Lemon juice 15 millileters
Sliced ham, diced 115 grams
Mushrooms, small 60 grams
Five-minute Pastry 1/2 batch
Thyme 1 spray
Parsley 1 spray
Celery 60 grams
Onions 60 grams
Salt To season
White peppercorns To season
Flour 40 grams
Butter 30 grams
Cream 60 millileters
White wine 60 millileters
Egg 1

**Method of preparation**
Cut chicken into 1-inch cubes — leave mushrooms whole —finely slice onions and celery — grind pepper-corns — measure flour, butter, cream and wine — prepare five-minute pastry using only half quantity — roll out a top only for the pie.

**Method of cookery**
Place chicken in only sufficient water to cover. Add herbs, cover, and simmer for 25 minutes.

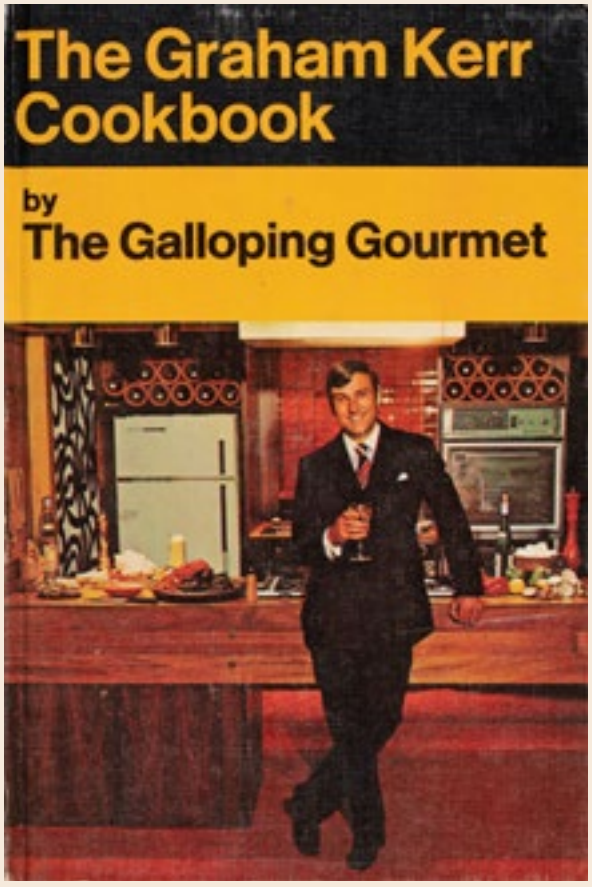
Make a roux with butter and flour. Strain off 5 fluid ounces chicken stock to make a stiff sauce.

Season the sauce, add the wine and cream. Stir well.

Lay half the chicken meat with onions and celery in pie dish, cover with ham, then place very lightly fried whole mushrooms, back side down, on ham. Sprinkle with lemon juice and top with remaining chicken. Pour over sauce. Cover with pastry top. Gild pastry with beaten egg.

Bake at 375° F for 40 minutes. Cover pie top with foil if it cooks too soon.

Photo shot on Kodak Ultramax, by Joy Lai




*The Graham Kerr Cookbook* cover, 1969 Doubleday edition

Though not hugely complicated, the Parramatta Chicken Pie has three components that I now confidently count in my repertoire — tender poached chicken, rich and flaky pastry and a roux-based wine and cream sauce.

I started by making the pastry, rubbing the butter into the flour by hand, and adding just enough chilled water to bind it — no kneading required — to maintain the flaky crumbliness. I doubled the quantities for pastry listed in the ingredients because I added a base: I have firm opinions on what constitutes a true pie, and it's not a pastry lid on a stew. (My tendency to modify a recipe I've never cooked before remains a bone of contention with my wife.)

While the pastry chilled in the fridge, I put the skinless chicken breasts and thighs into a large pot of cold water with peppercorns, fresh thyme and parsley. I brought it to a rolling boil and then took it off the flame, letting residual heat gently poach the chicken.

**The Parramatta Chicken Pie has three components that I now confidently count in my repertoire.**

Rather than using the raw onion and celery the recipe calls for, I softened them in olive oil and set them aside while I sautéed the portobello mushrooms in butter.

I rolled the pastry out to about a 3-millimetre thickness and pressed half of it into the cast iron saucepan I used instead of a pie dish. I lined it with baking paper and then poured in a Tupperware container full of trusty dried peas to weigh the pastry down during its blind baking session and create a semi-cooked pie base. (It was definitely a Eureka! moment for me when I first discovered this technique.)

For the sauce, I made a classic roux by stirring sifted flour into frothing butter and cooking until it made a golden paste. I added stock from the poached chicken, white wine and — in faithful Galloping Gourmet fashion — a generous amount of cream, adjusting liquids to get a thick sauce.

When the pie base came out of the oven, I layered the filling: the onion and celery mix, then layers of sliced chicken, chopped leg ham and a mushroom one, before topping it with the remaining chicken to form a peak in the centre. I poured the sauce all over, nudging the various layers with a wooden spoon to let it flow through evenly.

Finally, I added the lid, using leftover pastry for a decorative sun motif. I brushed the top with egg yolk, before baking for a further 20 minutes until the crust was cooked and golden.

I served it fresh from the oven, steam rising and the buttery pastry aroma filling the room. The pie kept its shape when sliced and served, the succulent poached chicken and umami-rich mushrooms holding their position under the flaky pastry lid. I served it with a subtly wooded Chardonnay, but a light red would do well too.

# SYDNEY ON ICE

WORDS **Geoff Barker**

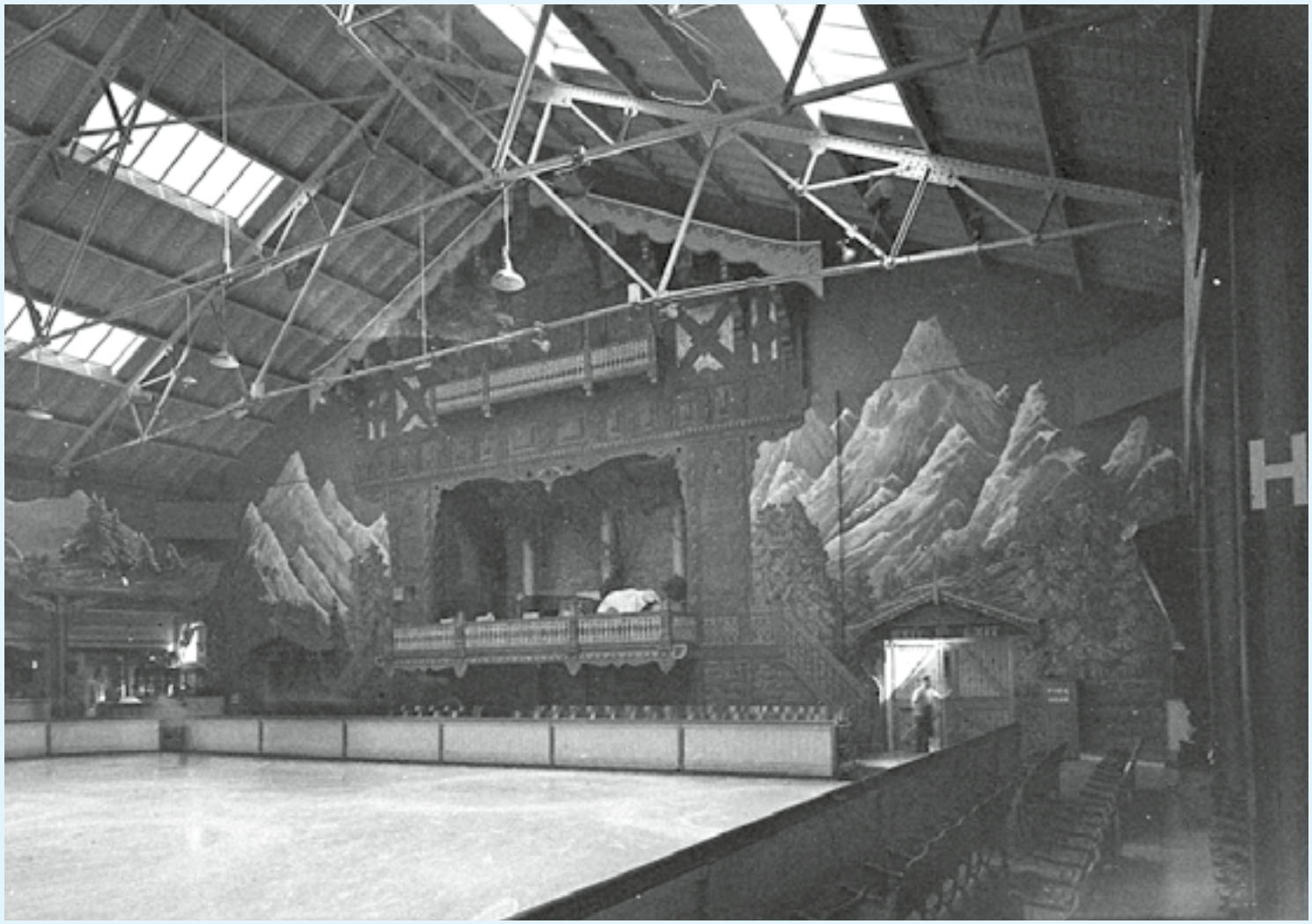
## Sydney's first ice skating rink, the Glaciarium

At the start of the twentieth century, many Australians with ties to continental Europe perhaps felt nostalgic for winters of snow and ice and their associated sports. So in 1907 Sydneysiders interested in ice skating and tobogganing must have welcomed the opening of the Sydney Glaciarium, an indoor ice skating rink on the site of the old Cyclorama building on George Street at Haymarket.

The Glaciarium was managed by Dunbar Poole, an Irishman who had come to Australia in 1899. Poole was a passionate supporter of the rink and was himself a figure skater, professional instructor, speed skater and 'hockey' player. Poole's association with the Glaciarium ended in 1931 when he moved back to England.

The Sydney Glaciarium was the third indoor ice rink to open in Australia and the first in Sydney. It incorporated the latest Hercules refrigeration machines and used over 12 kilometres of underfloor piping to freeze an ice floor 52 metres long and 23 metres wide. Even so, the machines couldn't compete with the heat of an Australian summer and, as a result, the Glaciarium was only open during the winter months. In the off-season, the building was used to screen some of the earliest films seen in Sydney.

A woman getting some help with her skates at the opening of the 1936 season of the Sydney Glaciarium. *PIX* magazine, 11 May 1936. Photo by Grimes



Interior of the Sydney Glaciarium Ice Rink, May 1940. Photo by Sam Hood

Located directly across from what was then the new Central Railway Station, the Glaciarium was hugely popular. General entry was two shillings (around $16 in today's money) and the venture soon made Poole a wealthy man. People from all walks of life came to skate and enjoy the spectacle. But the highlight of the season was the Glaciarium's winter carnival, with demonstrations of 'fancy' skating on lavish sets that recreated the ancient world of Pompeii or the desolate expanse of Antarctica.

The Glaciarium's success led to ice spectaculars, with professional skaters performing tricks and showing off their prowess. These became social events and fashion was an important part of the spectacle. We are now used to champion figure skaters' extravagant outfits, but when the Glaciarium first opened, most casual skaters wore sensible warm clothing — suits, ankle-length skirts and jumpers. But for 'fancy' skaters, a high level of physical exertion, the need for flexibility and the desire for visually arresting outfits led to the embrace of new fashion. At times, these outfits challenged the morals of the day, especially female skaters' outfits.

In the 1930s, Norwegian Olympian Sonja Henie was the first to wear a knee-length 'short' skirt, which made it easier to perform her jumps, rather than an accepted calf-length one. By the mid 1930s, after a visit to the ice rink, London socialites would gather at 'ice-clubs' for cocktails and dinner, wearing flared skirts that reached just below the knee. Australian skaters followed these European trends; by 1939, *The Daily Telegraph* made it clear that 'any old skirt or sweater is no longer the cry, but rather, saucy skating ensembles fashioned in velvet, lightweight flannel and

**At times, these outfits challenged the morals of the day, especially for female skaters.**

bright cheery plaids.' The following year, rainbow pastels — especially ice blue — were in fashion.

The Glaciarium was largely responsible for the increasing number of professional and sporting skaters in Sydney. Open for morning, afternoon and night-time sessions, it offered lessons in ice skating and figure skating and was the venue for demonstrations of the developing sport of ice hockey.

In 1908, the Glaciarium hosted an ice hockey match between local and American sailors from the visiting Great White Fleet. In 1929, five years after the first Winter Olympic Games were held in Chamonix, France, the Glaciarium hosted a NSW-based Figure Skating Championship. The Sydney Glaciarium was also where international ice skating legend Pat Gregory took her first lessons. She went on to win a gold medal in the 1947 International Ice Skating Championships. Gregory, whose legs were reputedly insured for £10,000, made an appearance on an early BBC television broadcast of the International Ice Carnival held in London the following year.

After nearly 50 successful years, the Glaciarium ran into financial difficulties and closed in 1955. The building was demolished in 1961. Now the only remaining remnant of the Glaciarium is the heritage-listed facade at 849 George Street, next to a McDonalds.

**Geoff Barker, Senior Curator**

Above from left: Star ice skater Pat Gregory, Sydney Glaciarium, 23 September 1947. Photo by Robert Donaldson for *Pix* magazine

Ron Priestley, trick ice skater, and an accomplice, Sydney Glaciarium, 12 April 1947. *Pix* magazine, photographer unknown

Ice skater Hazel Edwards, Sydney Glaciarium, 14 March 1950. Photo by Robert Rice for *Pix* magazine

Fiona Kelly McGregor.
Photo by Joy Lai

WORDS **Bruce Carter & Anne Hocking**

# Recording proud LGBTQ+ voices

## 'You have to listen to people's stories ... you might be inspired by them.'

In February 2023, Sydney experienced possibly the queerest 17 days in its history. WorldPride — an international festival that global cities bid to host — and the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras festival united for celebrations that crossed the cultural spectrum. Over a million people from 71 different countries attended a Sydney WorldPride 2023 event. After the three years of lockdowns and COVID-driven uncertainty, the celebrations felt like a collective exhalation for queer people and their allies.

In conjunction with our dynamic *Pride (R)evolution* exhibition, the Library wanted to further document what shape contemporary queer lives are taking 20 years into the millennium. We wanted to get a sense of the impact the complex swirl of change in social attitudes and understandings of gender identity and sexuality has had on the ways people are living their queer lives today.

Oral history — the planned recording of a person's unique recollections of their life — has been part of the Library's collecting remit since the 1980s. More than 12,000 hours of recordings of personal recollections documenting life in NSW have been collected, including interviews with queer communities in the 1980s and 1990s.

Oral history lends itself to queer memory-making and was the obvious choice to supplement the material the Library already held. As a research method, it had sat for many years at the boundary edge of historical practice. Like the LGBTQ+ communities themselves, it has only been in recent years that oral history has claimed its place and gained respectability. The Library wanted to recognise, celebrate and capture the unique experiences, struggles, achievements and contributions of these communities as they are seen in 2023, reflecting the words of artist and writer Archie Barry, who observed, 'Predecessors confirm that you are not alone in history.'

One of the people we interviewed was artist and academic Christine Deane who reflected in her interview that two events 33 years apart have stayed with her. The first was the passing through the NSW state parliament of the bill that decriminalised sex between consenting males aged over 18. Deane was having a few days out of Sydney in the Blue Mountains with her boyfriend. The couple heard the news on the radio of the guesthouse they were staying in. Finally, they would not risk a jail sentence simply by being together. The second significant moment in history for LGBTQ+ Australians that she recalls is the announcement by Chief Statistician David Kalisch of the result of the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey on the morning of 15 November 2017. In the years between the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1984 and the same-sex marriage vote in 2017, Christine Deane transitioned from male to female, coming out for the second time.

The three decades that bookend these two significant events in the history of queer people in NSW mark a period of extensive social and cultural shifts in Australia around understandings of sexuality and gender diversity. For Christine, coming out as a gay man in the late 1970s Australia was revelatory. Speaking of transitioning from male to female in the new millennium, Christine says:

Above from left: Pauline Pantsdown (aka Simon Hunt) in 1998. Photo by Troyt Coburn

Activist and social justice advocate Betty Hounslow. Photo by Holly Zwalf

'The process of becoming is the most difficult phase, my life's a lot easier now than it was as a younger person so the positives outweigh the negatives many times over. I'm just glad to have survived.'

Six interviewers drawn from the queer community have spoken to a vast range of people, including a Uniting Church minister, two DJs, political activists, a psychologist, a security person, a drag artiste, a human rights lawyer, various business people, a state politician, artists and a first-grade footballer. Two threads that run through the 35 interviews undertaken for this project are the place that the term 'Pride' occupies for people in the context of their identity, and the ways in which life as an out queer person today is easier than it has been in the past.

For writer and artist Fiona Kelly McGregor, working life is definitely easier, 'because there is a place for us and I dare say that it is recognised as a market value and it really does come down to that — and that's how politics has changed. Queers have voting power now,' she told interviewer Holly Zwalf, adding, 'What strikes me is that people can see themselves on TV and in books, and they can see varying versions, which is just incredible because we had nothing like that — next to nothing.'

Ian Roberts, who came to the attention of footy fans playing gloriously for the South Sydney Rabbitohs in the late 1980s, was the world's first professional rugby league player to come out as gay, which he did while playing for Manly Warringah in 1995. He told interviewer Martin Portus he never understood the concept of 'gay pride' when he was younger, saying, 'I used to have a huge issue with the term "gay pride" — for me it was like being proud about having brown eyes and brown hair. I can say I have pride in the LGBTQ community, I didn't have shame about being same-sex attracted.'

A moment around the kitchen table at his parents' house days prior to the marriage equality plebiscite in 2017 was small but memorable for him. 'Just prior to marriage equality, we were sitting round the table and my Dad — who normally doesn't say much — was reading the paper while we were talking about the plebiscite, put down the paper and just said, "Why shouldn't you be allowed to marry?" then went back to his newspaper.' As is the case for many queer people, Robert's family had struggled to accept his gayness, and the moment touched him. 'It doesn't seem like much, but it was like, "You actually get it Dad, you actually get it now."'

Betty Hounslow, who died suddenly in July 2023, was a tenacious advocate for social justice that reflected the shifting nature of her identity as a lesbian as queer visibility increased, and legal rights and social acceptance expanded. She recalled, 'When I was younger it was very significant, and in the forefront of my mind all the time. Now it's just so ordinary. It doesn't seem so significant anymore. I don't introduce myself as lesbian but don't shy away from it either. Earlier it was a really big decision to make whether you would let people know. That's completely different now.'

Reflecting on the concept of Pride, Hounslow told us, 'It's never been a term that I've been very enamoured of. Pride seems to imply that we are somehow really different from everyone else — but I don't feel very different from everyone else. And I don't quite know what I've got to be proud of by simply being lesbian. I'm proud of what I've done as

Former professional rugby league player Ian Roberts. Photo by Martin Portus

Artist and academic Christine Deane. Photo by Holly Zwalf

DJ Sveta Gilerman

a lesbian, what I've helped achieve. I understand why it speaks to others so much, people who have spent years and years being ashamed, humiliated, cowed or invisible ... Pride is very important for them, so I would never denigrate it.'

Activist Robyn Kennedy — who was part of the team that worked to bring WorldPride to Sydney — says visibility has been key to her understanding of Pride: 'I know horror stories from working at the international level. Without being visible you can't change anything.'

As one of the first out and proud lesbian clergy in the Uniting Church of Australia, Nicole Fleming knows all about the power of being visible. For her, Pride has 'something to do with an unapologetic acceptance and loving of oneself — on an individual front, but it's also a celebration of that, and a celebration more broadly within the community of the wonderful diversity that is encapsulated in the LGBTQI community. In the 13 years since I was ordained it is easier. I'm not worried when I go to places that people are thinking "there's that gay minister".

'That there is a place in the church for me and that I know that people value what I offer in the church, there's been a shift. I can just get on with ministry without too many barriers.' Living with her partner and their son in suburban Sydney, she says she feels accepted. 'Our son is in a preschool that is very diverse, and he is just part of everything.'

Simon Hunt, aka performance satirist Pauline Pantsdown, says he recognises Pride as a mechanism for self-acceptance. He believes that 'In the end its about having the confidence to be yourself' but acknowledges his position in the LGBTQ+ community is markedly different from some queer people's daily life experience. 'I will only be proud as a gay man when I am still taking part in efforts to help those people who have been left behind, such as transgender people.'

Popular Sydney DJ Sveta Gilerman recalls migrating as a teenager to Australia from Ukraine. Apart from her clothing, she says the most treasured items she brought to Australia were her vinyl records, on the famous Russian Melodiya label. When she arrived she was unaware that she'd spend decades of her working life in her adopted country bringing the pleasure of music to hundreds of thousands of queer folk. 'I have more hope now than I did,' she told interviewer Holly Zwalf. 'Things can monumentally change. I believe you have to listen to people's stories; you might be inspired by them.'

We hope to stimulate this kind of listening, and inspiration, with this extraordinary series of oral history interviews. They offer a living resource for researchers, and are a potent reminder that libraries can be places where communities can reflect on their own histories.

The interviews are currently available via the State Library of NSW online catalogue and will soon be available on Amplify, the Library's audio transcription tool.

**Bruce Carter is a Specialist Librarian who co-curated the *Pride (R)evolution* exhibition. Anne Hocking is a Librarian in Collection Acquisition and Curation.**

**We still are using the same techniques and practices we have been using for tens of thousands of years.**

Photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum

WORDS **Kodie Mason**

# String Bag
## from Sydney coastal area, collected before 1821

String or net bags are produced first by making rope, then weaving it together to make intricate loops that hold together, like a net. These bags were used by both men and women to carry knobs of resin, fishing tackle, scrapers and other personal items, as well as fish, shellfish, fern roots, berries, bulbs, blossoms and other food items. Depending on what they held inside, the bags would expand to become quite large and were very strong. There are early colonial images of string bags, similar to this one, being carried — hung over shoulders, held in hands or strung over the head and down the neck.

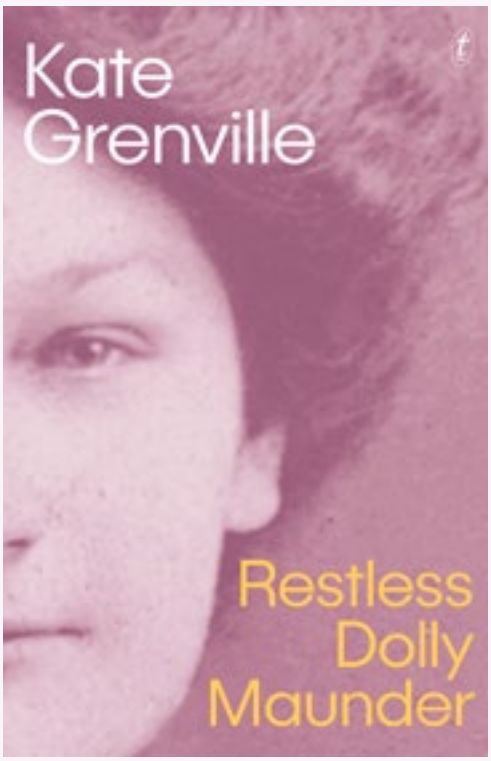
Bags like these are usually made of rope from certain kinds of tree barks, stripped and soaked before being woven into rope. It was then twisted and looped into a bag or net, like the one shown here. This strong weaving technique is still used today by myself and many others.

This particular bag was made from plant fibre from the Illawarra flame tree (*Brachychiton acerifolius*), and other bark fibres. It measures 45.1 cm high, 35 cm wide, and is 3 cm deep. One distinct feature of the bag that you can see on closer inspection is that it has a separate handle that is threaded through the opening. Notice the beauty of this bag and how intricate the loops are, creating a moving or waved look.

Weaving is an important cultural practice passed down to me from generations before, from when I was a young age. Since I can remember, I have been using different plants and fibres, weaving and creating things, like rope, with my pop. I still practise and even teach weaving to others today. Weaving grounds me and connects me to my culture. Being able to see this bag today is a unique glance into the past and allows me to make connections to our current practice. We are still using the same techniques and practices we have been using for tens of thousands of years.

**Kodie Mason is a community researcher who belongs to the Gweagal clan of the Dharawal nation.**

***Wadgayawa Nhay Dhadjan Wari*, an exhibition of 30 objects that is part of a joint Australian National University–Australian Research Council project called Mobilising Aboriginal Objects: Indigenous History in International Museums, continues at the Library until 28 January. This string bag was acquired, somehow, by midshipman Frederick Bedwell for the private collection of George Annesley, 2nd Earl of Mountnorris, and housed at Arley Castle in Worcestershire, England. It has been held by the British Museum in London since the 1860s.**




## Restless Dolly Maunder

by Kate Grenville

Text Publishing

If your very livelihood depends on the whim of the weather, do you have the luxury of being able to love a sunburnt country? A clever passage in Kate Grenville's new book sets out the answer, as she describes the hardship and struggle of her ancestral family on the land in Currabubula, south-west of Tamworth.

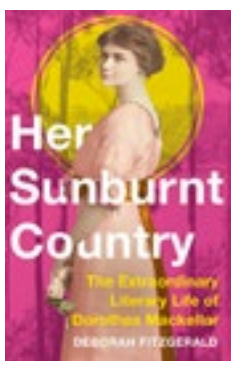
Notwithstanding her cheeky jab at Dorothea Mackellar's romantic view of the Australian landscape, Grenville adorns *Restless Dolly Maunder* with sensual depictions of the land. Even more impressively, she applies her meticulous and forensic eye to the claustrophobic interiors of Maunder/Russell family life over about 70 years.

We meet Dolly Maunder as a child in the 1880s and learn quickly how narrow, monotonous and hard life can be for a girl in a farming family. There is one path for a woman of her class — to marry and be worn down by grinding and relentless tasks. The fact that Molly is clever makes this stark message worse because she knows she could have another life, if only her father would give permission.

Grenville's descriptions of Dolly's experiences as a child and young woman are notable and evoke potential romantic relationships that are not quite realised, few words giving a sense of the tactile and sensory, and the inevitability of sex, given the right conditions.

Molly's ambition and drive are catalysts for change once she is settled with her husband Bert. She has ideas beyond the farm and orchestrates a series of moves and business ventures — with family in tow — to the city, suburbs and back to the

## Her Sunburnt Country:




### The Extraordinary Literary Life of Dorothea Mackellar

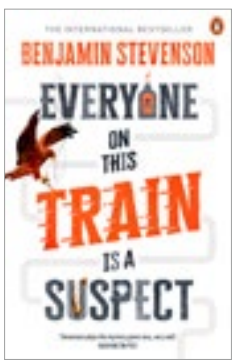
by Deborah FitzGerald

Simon & Schuster

How many biographers can access their subject's innermost thoughts by decoding their encrypted diary entries? Deborah FitzGerald's new biography claims to do just that, telling the unconventional life story of Isobel Marion Dorothea Mackellar, creator of 'My Country', one of Australia's best-loved poems. Surprisingly little has been written about the Sydney-born poet, the only daughter of a wealthy medical family, whose love for the land developed on family farms in the Hunter Valley and Gunnedah.

'My Country' first appeared in 1908 under the title 'Core of My Heart', transcribed by the 19-year-old poet into one of her verse books, now held by the Library. FitzGerald shapes her narrative through previously unpublished diaries, profiling the young author as beautiful, multilingual and sophisticated, an early feminist who rejected marriage and motherhood in favour of an artistic life, pursuing poetry and travel. Disdained by some as a 'one poem wonder', she fell victim to her early adulation. Her ongoing health issues were increasingly kept at bay with medication — and brandy.

**Margot Riley**




## Everyone on this Train is a Suspect

by Benjamin Stevenson

Penguin Random House Australia

For those who have read *Everyone in My Family Has Killed Someone*, main character Ernest Cunningham is back. He's now a published crime writer, having survived a family reunion where several people died. Now his challenge is to write a second book. The scene is set during a crime writers festival, as declared, 'on a train' — specifically The Ghan. Again, people die, providing subject matter for Ernest's next book.

It is all very tongue-in-cheek and self-aware, playing with the tropes of crime fiction. Hard for me — an editor — not to love these books when 'both cases are solved by a piece of punctuation', but they are also playful, entertaining and despite being completely transparent about the mechanics — how many times the murderer is mentioned or how many words before the next murder takes place — you are kept guessing. No surprises that Stevenson has had a substantial career in publishing and as a comedian — both are exploited admirably!

**Cathy Hammer**

country. Along the way we get a rich taste of Sydney and the bush over the first half of the twentieth century. There are memorable glimpses of the areas where Molly and her family live — in particular, the social strata of Wahroonga and the contrasting atmospheres of a series of country pubs and the people that they encounter. are well realised and a pleasure to read about.

I was struck by the notion that a fair amount of what Kate Grenville portrays in *Restless Dolly Maunder* is not that far removed from today's Australia — sure, structures and equality have improved, however much of Molly's world is familiar — entitlement, disadvantage, religious shibboleths, even endless hand-wringing about school choice (!) are still with us. And of course, there are the perennials of sexual attraction, wandering eyes, and the vagaries of families, the economy and the weather which loom large for people of any era.

*Restless Dolly Maunder* brings to mind the writer William Gibson's statement 'the future is already here — it is just not evenly distributed'. With Grenville's book we could extend this to note that the past is still here — it's just not evenly distributed.

Readers may judge for themselves the extent to which things have changed, but hopefully the hurdles are at least lower for most women today given the availability of education and choice.

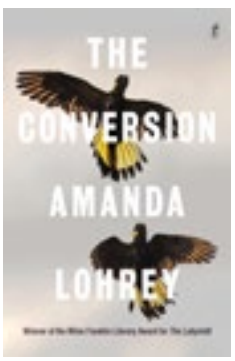
There are glimpses of the future in the book, especially in the character of Miss Norma St Leon, a photographer who 'didn't give a fig about not being married'. Keen readers of Grenville may also note that this is perhaps the third photographer that features in her work, and the description of photography in the context of the time is interesting here.

There is tragedy and heartbreak in the book, balanced by some success, and we exalt with Molly and Bert while they run a series of businesses including a palatial country pub. There are also more down-at-heel times, as we follow the trajectory of their fortunes and marriage. Grenville's depiction of Molly's relationships with her children is particularly emotive, notable for the pangs of hurt that arise from continued miscommunication with daughter Nance, and to some extent her son Frank. Molly's prickly manner is often at odds with her more tender internal thoughts.

*Restless Dolly Maunder* shows us that success and its opposite are temporary — there is a particularly poignant moment where an ageing Dolly sits stirring her tea with the silver teaspoon left over from a more golden time of her life.

Grenville's writing is assured and appears effortless throughout this memorable, insightful and enjoyable book.

**Cameron Morley**




## The Conversion

by Amanda Lohrey

Text Publishing

'Renovate: To cause to be spiritually reborn [or] to invest with a new and higher spiritual nature' (OED).

In her first novel since winning the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2021 for *The Labyrinth*, Tasmanian author Amanda Lohrey returns with another deeply layered and haunting work. In *The Conversion* we meet Zoe, at a juncture in her life, when she moves to the countryside to renovate an abandoned church. 'I feel I can't solve any other problem until I solve this one,' she says as she attempts to remodel the church, and that she wishes to 'exorcise a ghost'.

*The Conversion*, like *The Labyrinth*, speaks to Lohrey's interest in what the transformation of a physical space can, and can't, do for one's psyche. Can we ever truly have a 'blank slate' in the four walls we inhabit — or will the history of a place, and all we bring to it, always leave an indelible mark?

**Daniela Baldry**


## Retro Sydney, 1950–2000

by Nathan Mete

Scribe

Cool, quirky, nostalgic and occasionally cringeworthy, *Retro Sydney* is a visual celebration of the vibrant coming of age of Australia's first city between 1950 and 2000. Adapted from the popular Instagram account of the same name, the book captures Sydney at its retro best.

From Sydney's sparkling harbour and beaches to the bustling CBD; from Kings Cross nightlife and eastern Sydney glamour to quaint-looking outer suburbia, the book records some of the city's iconic milestones — royal visits, building the Sydney Opera House and Centrepoint Tower, the first City to Surf fun run, and the final Crowded House concert. It takes us up to the ringing in of the new millennium, with 'Eternity' emblazoned on the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

With images sourced from the State Library of NSW, City of Sydney Archives and National Archives of Australia, the book highlights Sydney's retro past and transformation into a city metropolis.

**Jennifer O'Callaghan**

# 20 questions

1. Which company, developed by a Harvard student, launched 20 years ago, on 4 February 2004?
2. Name the author who was also an expert on Mesopotamian pottery?
3. Which sporting competition first began 100 years ago, on 25 January 1924?
4. Which play by Tom Stoppard features two ill-fated minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*?
5. What is the name of the geometric shape of a doughnut or a lifesaving ring?
6. Name Africa's largest country by area?
7. What is diegetic music?
8. Where was Keen's Curry Powder originally produced?
9. Name the Queen of Disco, born LaDonna Gaines?
10. Who is the author of a recent history about fishing called *The Catch*?
11. What does a 'lithologist' study?
12. Which was the first movie to feature a computer-generated image?
13. Which well-known Australian artist once decorated a piano for entertainer Peter Allen?
14. In what year did Disney's most beloved character, Mickey Mouse, debut?
15. Where does the title of the novel *Limberlost* (2022) by Robbie Arnott come from?
16. Which planet has the most moons?
17. The Library holds the papers and the badge (seen at right) of which famous war correspondent?
18. Which publishing company takes its name from the oak tree?
19. What building now stands on Macquarie Street where Burdekin House, painted by Portia Geach, once was?
20. What is the Galloping Gourmet's real name?

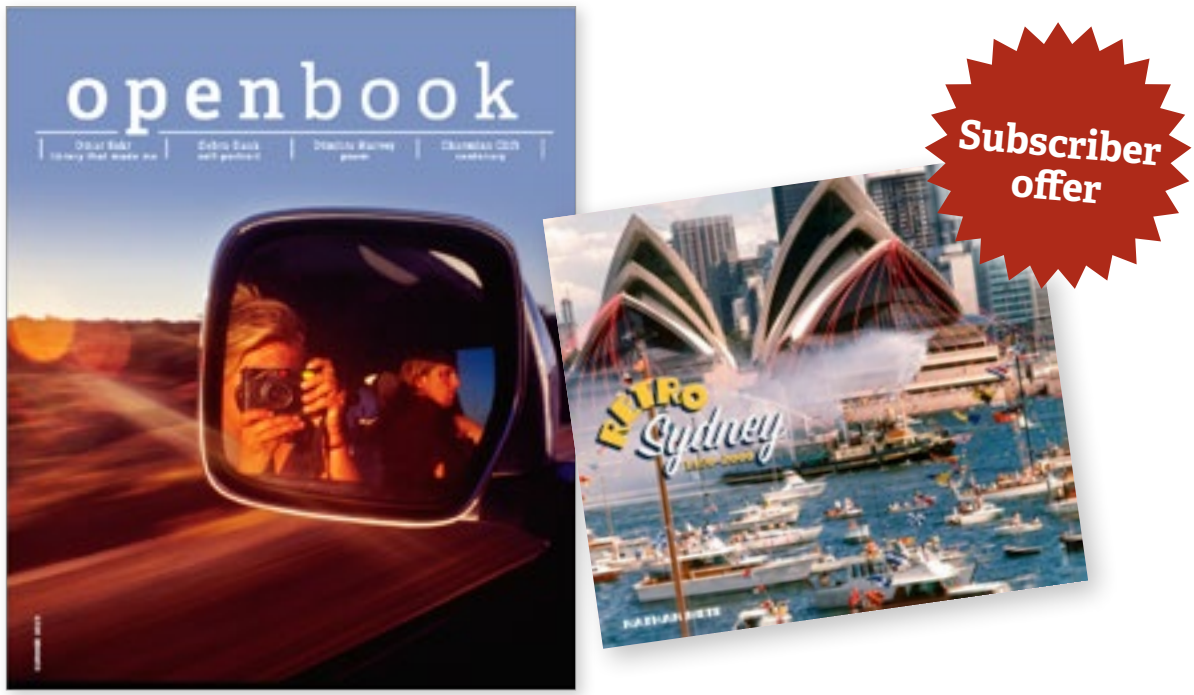
Find the answers to this quiz at the bottom of page 6.


5

8

17


19

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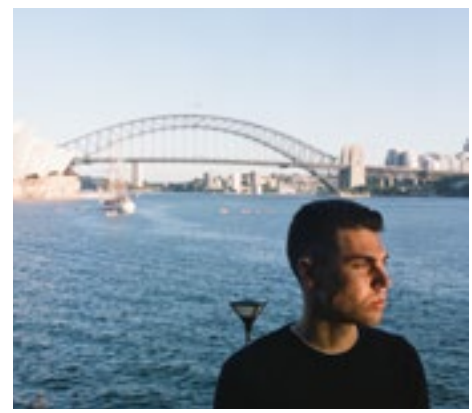
**Thanks to our friends at Scribe, the first 10 people to subscribe will receive a signed copy of *Retro Sydney* by Nathan Mete.**

**Revisit the cool, quirky, glamorous and exciting times of Sydney from the 1950s to 2000. Featuring many images from the State Library's collection, *Retro Sydney* celebrates Australia's first city, capturing its iconic sights and everyday scenes — some as they were, some as they remain generations later.**



Nathan Mete. Photo by Jack Shepherdson

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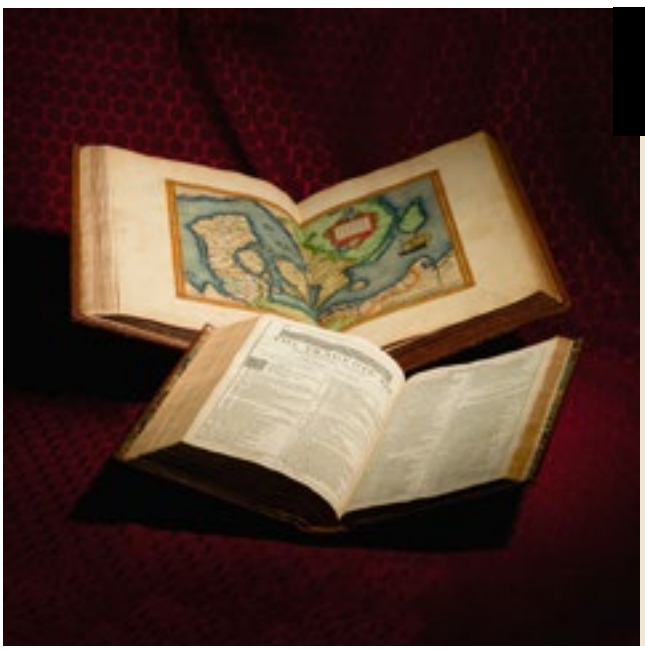

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**Curator-led guided tours**
Tuesday 12 December 11 am,
Saturday 13 January, 2 pm,
and Tuesday 23 January 11 am.
Free, bookings essential

**First Folio page turning**
Thursday 18 January, 11 am. Free

***Julius Caesar***
Discussion event, presented with Bell Shakespeare. Thursday 18 January, 6.30 pm $15/$10

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*On The Road*, outback Queensland. Photo by Narelle Autio. Images courtesy of the artist and Michael Reid Sydney + Berlin

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By Alana Valentine at Sydney Theatre Company.

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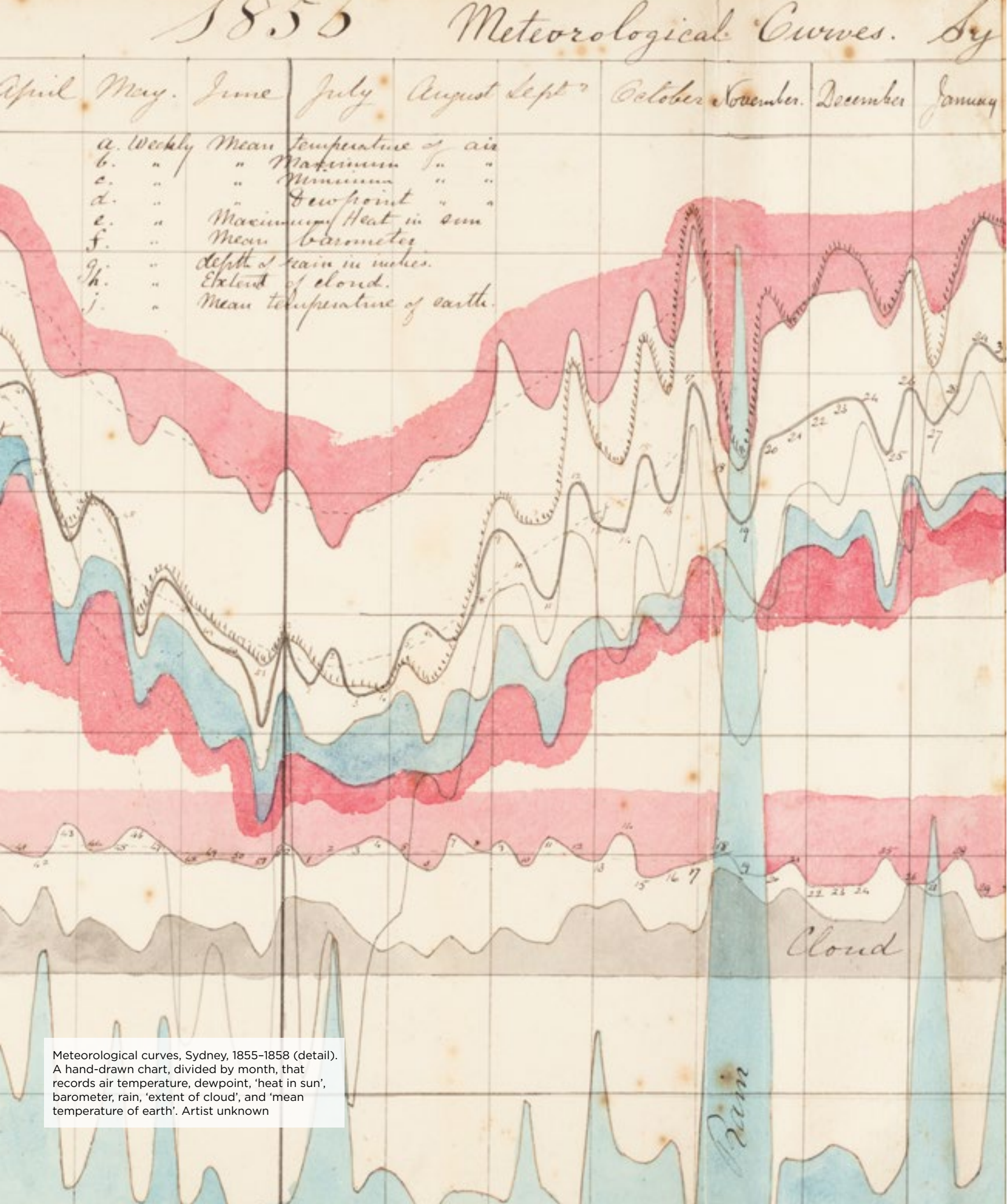
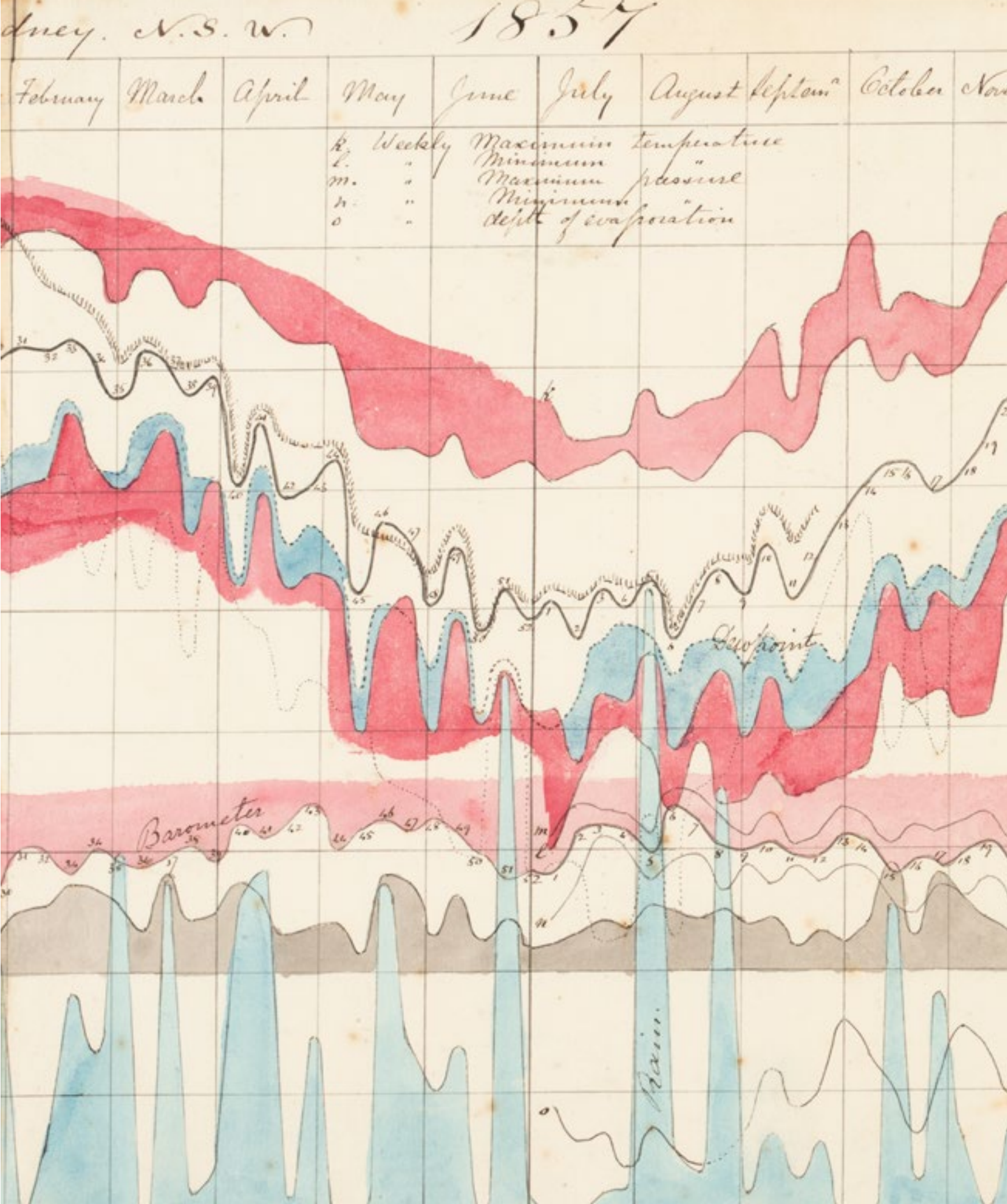



Meteorological curves, Sydney, 1855–1858 (detail). A hand-drawn chart, divided by month, that records air temperature, dewpoint, 'heat in sun', barometer, rain, 'extent of cloud', and 'mean temperature of earth'. Artist unknown

dney. N.S.W. 1857

February | March | April | May | June | July | August | Septem^r | October | Nov

k. Weekly Maximum temperature
l. " Minimum "
m. " Maximum pressure
n. " Minimum "
o " deficit of evaporation



I would like to marry
a fisherman, I said.
The girls rolled their eyes
and shrieked as one at such a
choice, 'A fisherman!' It hadn't
occurred to me it might seem
strange. 'Yes, but he would
be a fisherman who
loved reading ...

**From *Night Fishing* by Vicki Hastrich**

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