

Libby Gleeson 1969 – 1971 Wesley College

Writer, Educator, Activist

I entered Wesley in 1969, one of the first group of about thirty-five women. It suited me well, I'd come from a co-ed high school in a large country town, I wanted to live on campus but I had no desire to live in an all-female establishment. Some welcomed us women; those men who had campaigned for years to have women join the student body but there was also lingering hostility from some who took themselves off to the all-male preserve of Upper Wylie and acted as though we didn't exist.

It was a period of change. There were no initiation rites, no fresher duties that served to elevate the role and power of the older students and there was a strong sense that Wesley was a progressive community, years ahead of the other single sex colleges. We were a small band of women, committed to making sure that this experiment would work. Most of us involved ourselves in sporting and cultural activities and also in the political movements of the university.

The feeling of social change was not only inside the walls of the College. On the campus and in the streets, change was also evident. The most dramatic of these focused on the Vietnam war, Australia had had troops in Vietnam for a number of years and the opposition to the deployment was growing. Wesley had an active anti-war group who took part in rallies on the front lawn and demonstrations on the streets of the city. Those in charge of the College, The Reverend Norman Webb and Michael Horsborough were enthusiastic participants

For two years I thoroughly enjoyed communal life. I made friends who have persisted for over thirty years but I wanted to experience the University from other perspectives too. I wanted to live independently and to find friends who came from a whole range of other backgrounds. College life with meals cooked for you and no transport concerns was comfortable and I wanted to move out of my comfort zone.

Thus began a life in shared houses: first Camperdown and then Paddington. I did get more involved with university activities but I also stayed close to friends who remained in college as well as those who had moved out or who had graduated.

I had come to university unsure of future directions other than that I wanted to study literature and modern history. Under the influence of Greg Urwin (fr 1966), the senior student in my first year, and now the Secretary General of the South Pacific Forum (based in Fiji), I pursued an honours degree in Australian History. I then decided that I wanted to teach and so spent a year studying for a Diploma in Education. Almost a term of that year was spent reading on the front lawn as much of the Arts Faculty was on strike over the University's then failure to embrace courses in Womens' Studies.

I graduated and taught English and History in Picton just south of Sydney. Many of the staff commuted from the city but I threw myself into the life of the town and the school, coaching teams and producing a musical as well as teaching from Years 7 to HSc.

At the end of 1975, there was the traumatic national upheaval of the dismissal of the Labor Government and the subsequent then - as part of the First Wesley College women's hockey team in 1969 and now, 36 years, three children and 2.3 books later.

Election of Malcolm Fraser and the Liberals. I decided to join many of my age group and head for Europe. I thought I was going away for a year or so but it was to be five years before I returned home.

I based myself with friends in London and travelled in England for the first few weeks. Then a chance encounter with an old friend led to a trip to Italy and the offer of a job teaching English in an Italian town near Milan, I spent the next year there, teaching across the whole community and slowly learning to speak the language. For the first three months I understood almost nothing and I became more and more miserable.

My consolation was to immerse myself in writing. I had for some time considered that I wanted to write fiction and I found myself writing a series of short stories about change and loneliness. The form was too restrictive and I gradually realised I wanted to write a novel. By the end of my contract, I knew I wanted to go back to London, immerse myself in the English language and write my book.

That book was to take three years. In London I found a writers' group that met weekly in the City Literary Institute, Covent Garden. I became an active member, frequently reading and then soaking up any criticism that was offered.

The work was rewritten about eight or nine times first by hand and then on a manual typewriter. I supported myself by teaching English to foreign students and I lived frugally in a squat with others who were travelling and struggling to become creative artists of various forms. One of them, Euan Tovey, a scientist from New Zealand was to become my husband.

We returned to Australia in 1980. A stint at the Institute of Languages, University of NSW, supported us while Euan completed his PhD. At night, I put the finishing touches to the novel and with much trepidation sent it off to a publisher. The book was rejected as too radical and complex for a readership of kids about twelve. It went into the bottom drawer and

I had a baby. Months later, I took the manuscript out, rewrote a few bits and sent it off again, this time to Angus and Robertson, Australia's oldest, home-grown publisher. This time, the work was accepted and with minimal editing, *Eleanor, Elizabeth* was published in 1984. It was runner-up in the Children's Book Council awards, was published in America and Scandinavia and has stayed in print for twenty years.

I was then faced with a major decision. Success in my teaching career at NSW University meant pressure to pursue a higher degree. Success with writing meant there were more stories I wanted to tell and I knew I wanted to have more children.

Academia lost and I went on to have two more children and to write twenty-three more books - so far.

I thought in the beginning that I was a novelist. I am, but now I am also a writer of short stories, of picture books, of how-to books about writing and of television scripts. The novels now vary from longer complex works for an older, adolescent readership, to simpler, shorter work for younger children. The short stories have come from commissions, from invitations to submit something for an anthology, or from requests to write something for a good cause. In 2004 I published a story in the huge collection *Kids Night In*, the proceeds of which go to War Child. This charity supports children who are victims of war in places like Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq and the Congo.

In my childhood, there were not the beautiful full colour picture books that are now everywhere. When my own children were born, I discovered a whole new range of work: stories told through both words and pictures. It has been my pleasure to work in this form with some of the most talented illustrators in the country. Armin Greder, and I have shared major prizes including the

international award: the Bologna Ragazzi for our work *The Great Bear* in 2000 and the Picture Book of the Year from the Australian Children's Book Council, in 2002 for *An Ordinary Day*.

From my success in writing for younger children came an invitation to join the team writing scripts for *Bananas in Pyjamas*. Three minutes of television sounded easy but was much harder than I could have imagined. The production process leads to a loss of creative control for the writer and after a few episodes I happily returned to the world of books.

The life of a writer is isolated. The best work comes from extended periods of contemplation; hours and days spent with the ideas in your head and with scribbled pages of notes before anything hits the computer screen. To counter this I have had another life of involvement in the community with my children's schools, with local arts organisations and with social causes. I am currently involved with ChilOut, the movement to get all children out of detention centres where many still linger despite the Howard Government's claims to the contrary. In this case, the cause and the writing will intersect.

I am also involved in the writers' organisation the Australian Society of Authors, the professional association that looks after the interests of those who create books. We advocate for writers in the areas of copyright law, defamation, lending right and all areas of cultural policy. I chaired the organisation from 1999-2001 and travelled widely in Australia and overseas in this capacity.

I have also been a judge for the Premier's Literary Awards and am a member of the NSW Arts Ministry Literature and History Committee that distributes money in grants to organisations that depend on the patronage of the state.

And finally, there is still a teacher inside me. I give regular guest lectures on Children's Literature and my own work to tertiary students in various universities in Sydney. I speak to audiences of children and adults in schools and libraries and I teach creative writing at Sydney University's Centre for Continuing Education. I consider that I learnt from mentors at the workshop I attended in London and I aim to play that role to aspiring writers who attend my course here in Sydney. There have been more than ten published works from these students in the past few years.

It's a strange business, writing fiction. Most of us can't articulate our reasons for spending our days making up stories. I tried when I wrote the how-to book, *Writing Hannah, On Writing for Children*. Before I became a writer, I had the grand notion that creating a work of art meant leaving something of oneself for posterity. I no longer feel that way. All I want to do is tell stories that are for the reader now. It isn't easy, but it's honest labour. I use that word deliberately. At the Canberra Wordfest, 1999, Dorothy Johnson described writing fiction as akin to childbirth, labouring to bring forth something new. Marion Halligan added that like the newly delivered mother, the novelist suffers amnesia, forgets the pain of delivery and sets out to do it all again. I couldn't agree more.

For information on my publications, see my website: www.libbygleeson.com.au

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