

UNDERGROUND WRITERS

# HISTORICAL FICTION

*Issue 33: Feb, 2021*



*Underground Writers Presents*

---

# **Issue 33: Historical Fiction**

**Publishers**

Jemimah Halbert Brewster  
Jessica Gately

**Editor-in-Chief**

Kate Lomas Glendenning

**Editors**

Ebony Bryant  
Jessica Gately  
Lauren Pratt  
Shelley Timms  
Grace Wholley

**Designer/Editor**

Paul Dielesen

The Underground Writers zine is published quarterly

Underground Writers would like to respectfully acknowledge this magazine was produced and edited on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and also on the traditional lands of the Wadjuk people of the Nyoongar nation. As an internationally-reaching magazine, Underground Writers also pays our respects to the traditional custodians of all the lands from which the stories and poems in this issue were sources.

Views expressed by authors are not necessarily those of the publisher. Copyright is reserved, no one is permitted to scan or photograph our pages and publish them elsewhere. Reproduction in whole or part is prohibited. The works in the Underground Writers zine often contain adult themes and language. Not recommended for readers under sixteen years of age.

**UNDERGROUND WRITERS**

[www.underground-writers.org](http://www.underground-writers.org)

First published in Australia in 2020 by Underground Writers

Typeset in 11.5/15 pt Baskerville

## Letter from the Editor

COMMENCING THE YEAR WITH THE 'HISTORICAL FICTION' issue created a range of 'blast from the past' submissions for us to read. After the uncertainties and frights of 2020, sometimes it's nice to reminisce about the past. When we sought submissions for this issue, we wrote that, 'What makes historical fiction captivating is not the absence of modern inventions but rather how our feelings and emotions are felt and expressed by people separated from us by time.' Although each submission is varied in era, topic, and characters, there is an undeniable comfort in the familiarity of the past. As you immerse yourself in Issue 33, we hope you capture waves of nostalgia as you glimpse back into the past.

This issue also marks the start of many changes at Underground Writers! Changes in the editorial team and changes in the structure of the organisation...ok, I'll tell you a few changes now. The cover might be a bit of a COLOURFUL hint. That's right! Our timely historical issue also launches the zine's shift from black and white to colour. We also have some sad news; two beloved editors departed from our team at the end of 2020 (not to name names...Dylan and Jess Rae), but thankfully new people are joining our ever-growing team! Jemimah also passed on her title of Editor-in-Chief (I wonder if you can guess who is the new Editor-in-Chief without peaking at the bottom.)

In order to make sure you are all scribbling your stories down, we have also released our issue themes for the year:

- Fanfiction
- Graphic novels
- Revenge

More information will follow so keep watching our website! Our mission at Underground Writers is to encourage and promote emerging Australian writers, so watch this space and become part of the growing Australian writing community.

**Kate Lomas Glendenning**  
**Editor-in-Chief**  
**February 2021**

## Contents

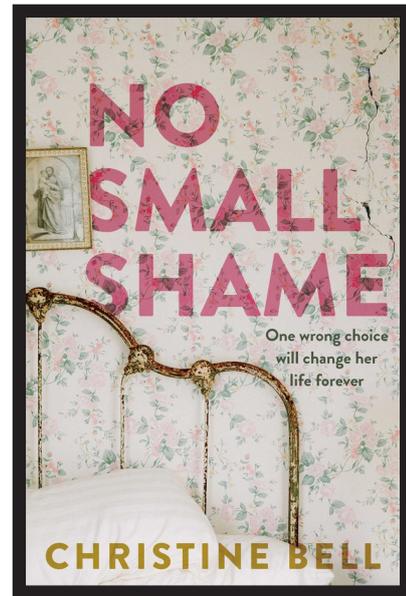
<i>Book Review: No Small Shame</i> <i>by Christine Bell</i>	8
Shelley Timms	
<i>Underground Books: Previews</i>	9
<i>The Mothers' Group</i>	13
Shannon Meyerkort	
<i>Fin de Siècle</i>	21
Alice Godwin	
<i>When Collingwood Calls</i>	29
Chrissie Bellbrae	
<i>Babushka Doll</i>	37
Saanjana Kapoor	
<i>Time and Tide</i>	41
Mark J. Keenan	
<i>Contributors</i>	xlvi
<i>Contact</i>	xlix



Book Review by Shelley Timms

## No Small Shame

Written by Christine Bell



**N**O SMALL SHAME follows Mary O'Donnell from her childhood in Scotland to her adulthood in Australia after emigrating with her family in the early 1900s. Mary sails from her home in Scotland to the East coast of Australia, settling in a small community and starting her life anew.

Mary comes from a strictly Catholic family, and when she falls pregnant out of wedlock her family uses their religion as an excuse to victim-blame and force shame upon her. She is made to marry a man that does not love her and eventually begins to raise her son alone.

Amidst the narrative of Mary's personal struggles, Bell has also threaded the issues facing Australians on the home front during World War One. The devastation of the Western front and the trail of destruction it leaves amongst small communities is deeply explored within this book, with heart wrenching consequences.

At the crux of this story is the feeling of helplessness; of being stuck in an era where women are forced to maintain gender

roles to the point where it is detrimental to their physical and mental wellbeing, and the overcoming of that by Mary and other peripheral characters. We see her go through unimaginable heartache and tragedy, only to slowly find her power and come out the other side harnessing her voice and autonomy. Secondary character Tom Robbins is also representative of this helplessness—his invisible illness keeps him from fighting in the war and this feeling of failure manifests itself in various ways.

Bell has done an excellent job capturing life during WWI in Australia, as well as the female experience during this era. The theme of guilt and voicelessness is prevalent throughout the book from various characters, pulling together a cohesive character study through one similar thread. If you are interested in reading a historical fiction that doesn't necessarily focus on romance but rather life during the war, I would highly recommend this book.

*No Small Shame* is published by Impact Press.

For more information, visit the [Impact Press website](#).

**NEW TO UNDERGROUND BOOKS**

## The Tour

Written by Andrew Mackie



**N**INETEEN-YEAR-OLD IDENTICAL TWINS Violet and Daisy Chettle can hardly believe their luck when they are recruited as maids to accompany the Queen's Lady-in-Waiting on the royal tour to Australia in 1954. It's just the ticket they need away from cold, grey England and the tension that's been brewing at home since the loss of their parents.

However, life on board the SS Gothic and indeed in the colony is far from the glamorous adventure they expected, and their relationship becomes even more strained when one twin discovers her sister's unconscionable act of betrayal.

As they travel from the bustling streets of Sydney to the remote sheep stations of Dubbo, they try to make the best of it. Diligent Violet is juggling commands from her superiors with the attentions of handsome Aussie driver Jack, while ambitious Daisy seeks love in all the wrong places while clawing her way to top deck. An opportunity to meet their estranged aunt living in the vast outback promises hope for a new future –

but have these girls ventured too far from home to ever find their way back?

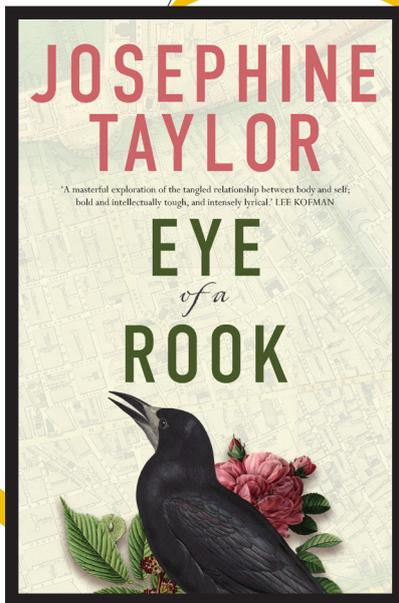
Based around one of the biggest true events in Australian history – the 1954 royal tour by the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II – this is a wickedly entertaining novel about the rifts and rivalries that can be found in every family, Royal or not.

*The Tour* is published by Penguins Books Australia.

For more information, visit the [Penguin Books Australia website](#).

**AVAILABLE NOW AT  
UNDERGROUND BOOKS**

coming soon

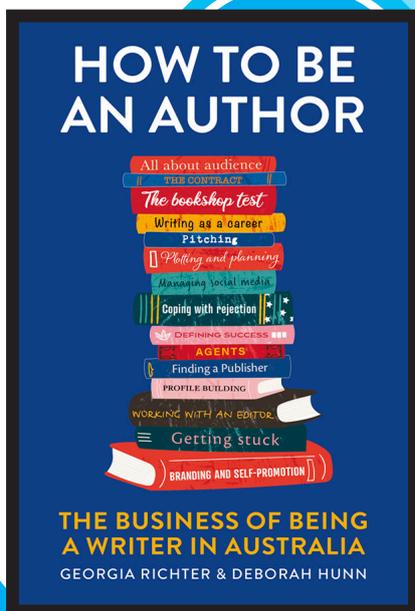


## Eye of a Rook

by Josephine Taylor

*Published by Fremantle Press*

*\$32.99*



## How to be an Author

by Georgia Richter & Deborah Hunn

*Published by Fremantle Press*

*\$34.99*

**I**N VICTORIAN LONDON, Arthur Rochdale's wife Emily is struck down by a pain for which she can find no words. In desperation, Arthur seeks the aid of Isaac Baker Brown and contemplates the surgeon's terrifying treatment for 'hysterical' women at his London Surgical Home.

Almost 150 years later, writer and academic Alice Tennant explores the history of hysteria to make sense of her own mystifying and private pain. Although she has direct access to a medical profession that should be able to help her, it seems that little has changed since 1866.

Circling ever closer to Arthur and Emily's story, Alice begins to question her own life and marriage. With understanding comes the discovery of the possibilities of creativity – and a newfound knowledge of self that will change the course of Alice's life.

**I**F YOU DREAM of being published, this book will teach you the nuts and bolts of what it means to be an author.

Georgia Richter and Deborah Hunn look at the business of becoming an author. In a friendly, informative and practical way they share all you need to know about inspiration and research, preparing to submit to a publisher, creating an author brand, legal, ethical and moral considerations, pitching and effective social media and much more.

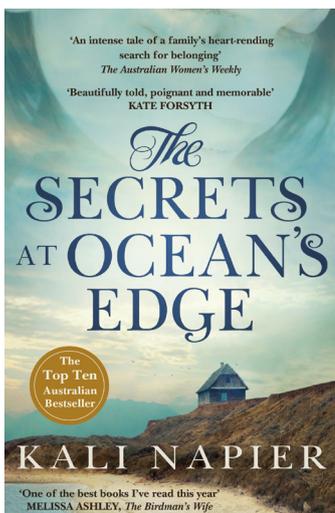
AUSTRALIAN  
DEBUT  
HISTORICAL  
FICTION

click the  
book to  
visit the  
store!



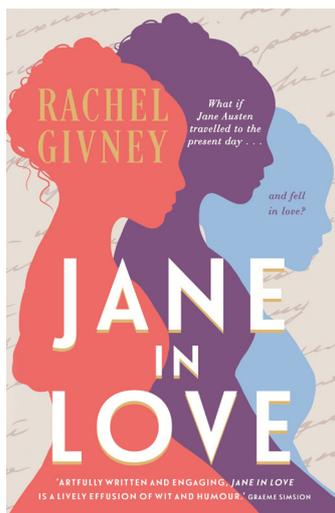
underground  
books

**10% OFF ALL HISTORICAL FICTION TITLES  
UNTIL FEBRUARY 28!**



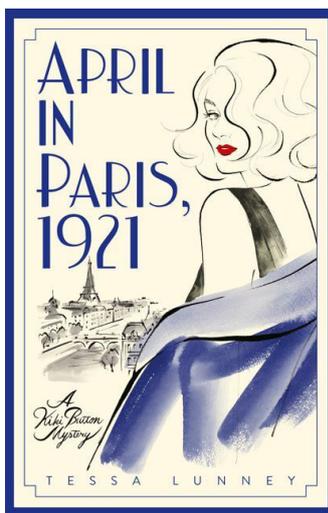
THE SECRETS AT  
OCEAN'S EDGE  
by Kali Napier

NOW **26.99** RRP ~~29.99~~



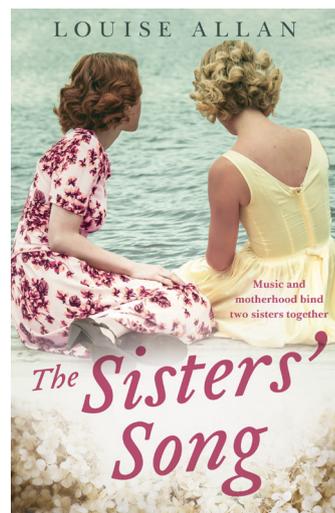
JANE IN LOVE  
by Rachel Givney

NOW **29.69** RRP ~~32.99~~



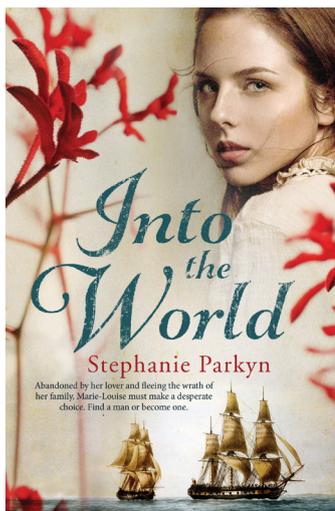
APRIL IN PARIS 1921  
by Tessa Lunney

NOW **18.89** RRP ~~20.99~~



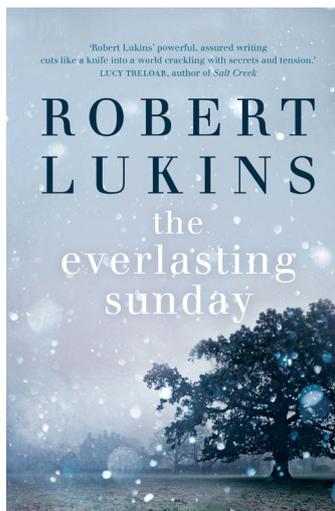
THE SISTERS' SONG  
by Louise Allan

NOW **26.99** RRP ~~29.99~~



INTO THE WORLD  
by Stephanie Parkyn

NOW **26.99** RRP ~~29.99~~



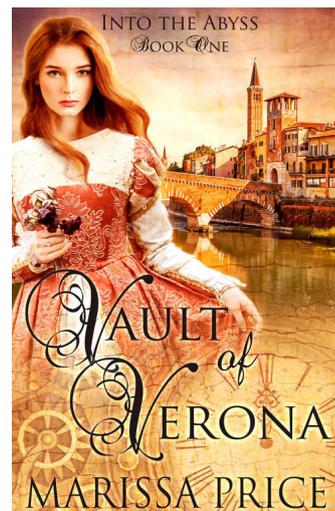
THE EVERLASTING SUNDAY  
by Robert Lukins

NOW **26.95** RRP ~~29.95~~



HALF MOON LAKE  
by Kirsten Alexander

NOW **29.69** RRP ~~32.99~~



VAULT OF VERONA  
by Marissa Price

NOW **26.99** RRP ~~29.99~~

Shannon  
Meyerkort

**The Mothers'  
Group**

UNDERGROUND WRITERS

# The Mothers' Group

*Shannon Meyerkort*

‘WELL, HERE YOU GO THEN, SON. Have a good time.’ Bill pauses. ‘Keep your nose clean.’

Paul knows there’s little point arguing. ‘Yes sir.’ He pops open the back door of the Kingswood and swings his long legs out. His gut clenches as the front passenger door opens and his mother clammers out. She looks like a musk stick in her favourite salmon pantsuit. Paul glances at Jason’s house and hopes none of the guys are watching.

‘You don’t need to kiss me goodbye,’ Paul mumbles. ‘It’s a 20th birthday party!’

Natasha laughs dismissively as she leans back into the car. Paul tries not to see as his parents kiss. His mum pulls out a heavy bag and cake tin from the front seat.

‘Right. See you then.’ Bill revs the engine as he speeds away leaving Paul and Natasha standing on the kerb. In the late afternoon sun, the shadows are long and the shapes familiar. Paul and Jason have been best friends since they were babies, when their mums met at a new mothers’ group.

‘Mum, what are you still doing here?’ Paul wonders if she knows about the reefer in his pocket. He crumples slightly around the middle. His new flares leave little to the imagination.

Natasha isn’t looking at her son, her eyes are trained on the two-storey house in front of them. ‘Dianne asked a couple of us to stick around...’

‘What! Why?’ Paul is incredulous. All he wants is to hang out with his mates, drink some beer, and have a smoke. Maybe Katie will be here.

‘Hold this.’ Natasha thrusts the cake tin at Paul. It feels wrong. Too light. ‘You’re not the only one with friends,’ she says, her face strained as she readjusts her bag. She begins striding towards the house.

Paul slinks up the path after her, face red, and prays that his mother won't interrupt the party by offering her cake or biscuits or whatever she has baked. When they reach the front door, Paul peels away, heading towards the side gate.

'Wait Paul!'

Anticipating the lipstick sticky kiss on his forehead Paul breathes deeply. But instead, Natasha just takes the tin out of his arms.

'Go easy on the beer,' she says quietly. 'None of you are legal yet.'

Paul's bravado returns. 'Old enough to be sent to war, but not old enough for a beer. What sort of country is this?' he scoffs and puffs out his chest, pitifully little to show for the months of work lifting weights in the back room.

A strange look clouds his mother's face. She lifts her chin at him. 'I'll be in the kitchen with the other women.'

He gestures at the tin, his stomach audibly rumbling. 'What about the cake?' he asks.

'That's not for you.'

The women are staring at the contents of Natasha's cake tin. Jean lets out a low whistle.

'How much is that?' Dianne asks from the stove, where she stirs a large pot. A haze hangs over the breakfast bar where the women stand, a heady mix of sweet steam and tobacco.

'Nine hundred, give or take. I took everyone's coins to the bank and got them changed. Weighed a ton otherwise.'

Barb nods approvingly at the bright orange, blue, and purple notes as she flicks her cigarette into a glass ashtray. 'Small denominations, that's good. Makes it easier to distribute. I've got the list of safe houses and supporters here.'

'Make sure you pass on our thanks to the others,' Dianne says and hefts the enormous saucepan onto the sink to cool. 'A lot of scones and cakes went into that pile of cash.' She smiles at her friends. 'Who would have thought all those years running the tuckshop and fundraising at school would have proved so...informative.' They laugh, but none of this is funny.

Natasha looks around at the faces in front of her. She knows them better than she knows her own and has watched them change over the years—a spray of lines around the eyes, a bloom of silver at the temples. The rangy boys outside are almost strangers to her now, long gone are the plump toddlers and energetic school-boys she once knew.

The creak of the screen door make the women jump. Jason, the birthday boy, materialises into the cloud of smoke, his bare feet curling on the linoleum floor. Barb covertly slides the lid back on the cake tin.

'The lads are hungry, Mum. Are you cooking us something?'

Dianne laughs nervously and steps in front of the large pot. 'This isn't for you boys, just a project we have on the boil.' Jean stifles a snigger.

'Your father said he would pick up some pizza on the way home from his club meeting. I'm sure he will be back soon.'

'We're hungry now. We ate all the cheese and crackers.' The boy's voice threatens to break into a whine. His eyes are red, his lids low. Natasha tries to reconcile the gangly youth in front of her with the talkative child she remembers.

'Excuse me Mrs Corby, Paul said you brought cake?' Even stoned, the boy remembers his manners.

Natasha looks across at Barb who has laid a tea towel over the cake tin. 'I'm sorry dear...' She is saved by the sound of Malcolm bursting through the front door, his arms piled high with thin cardboard boxes.

'Ladies!' he purrs. 'Lovely to see you all. Jason, mate, dinner is served.' Natasha can smell the beer on his breath as she reaches for some of the boxes. A thatch of hair explodes from his open-neck shirt. Jason takes the remaining boxes from his father, and Natasha goes to follow him but is pulled up short by Paul, hovering on the back step.

'Mum, I'll take them.'

Natasha can't help but take a deep sniff. She can smell beer and cheese but that is all. Suddenly her heart aches and her arms itch to embrace her son, protect him. That's what the Mothers' Group want; to keep all the sons safe. But she does not shame him in front of his friends, just hands the boxes over with a small smile.

When she returns to the kitchen, Malcolm has disappeared and the women are discussing the likelihood of being arrested the following day.

The plaintive growl of Bob Dylan wafts through the open kitchen door. The sun has set and Natasha can feel the puff of cold night air when she stands next to the screen. At the rear of the garden she can see her son and his friends—a dozen unidentifiable bodies sprawled across couches and beanbags dragged from the house. Long extension cords power strings of multi-coloured lights draped in the low branches of the jacaranda tree. A haze of smoke hangs in the air. There is a stillness to the group that makes Natasha shiver; the way their long limbs splay motionless reminds her of images from the news. She forces herself to turn away. Doesn't want to think of them that way, as unwritten stories, their pages left blank.

Barb is watching her, recognises the look on her face. 'Move over,' she says to Di-  
anne, back stirring at the stove. 'We will make a pot of hot chocolate for the lads.' She has a smile of small teeth and pink lipstick. 'Some radicals we are.'

With her arms deep inside long oven mitts and clutching the pot closely, Barb bustles down the dark concrete path to where the boys are huddled together. Natasha follows at her heels. She can hear Paul, his voice infused with conviction. She knows that tone and has fallen victim to its charm and confidence ever since he was a small boy. 'It's like a lottery,' he is saying. 'Our number might not be drawn, and even if it is, still doesn't mean they will actually call us up.'

Barb goes to step forward, into the circle of light, but Natasha stops her with a gentle hand. She wants to know what the boys are thinking, what they say to each other when they don't think anyone is listening. Jason's voice is raspy with smoke and anger. 'It's messed up, man. The government tells us we're too young to drink or vote, but they say we're old enough to kill or be killed. It's fucked.' The language shocks Natasha, but not the sentiment.

Another voice, this time filled with mirth. 'Maybe you should try and knock up Katie, Paul. Married men are granted deferments.' The group erupts into a chorus of animalistic grunts and hoots. Natasha feels her cheeks burn.

Barb takes the opportunity to step forward, allows the chocolate aroma to announce their intrusion. Natasha follows, lays a tray of mugs on an upturned wire milk crate. The record finishes, the needle skipping silently over the grooves. The women do not speak and head back to the kitchen. They've got work to do.

Dianne ladles the gloopy mixture she has cooked into pails, one for each woman. Wheat flour glue—a staple of street activists everywhere. Natasha divides the heavy stack of posters between them. Jean points to a map, the streets coloured in for each of the women. Barb smokes her cigarette.

‘I like this one best,’ Barb says, pointing to one flyer that says *Save Our Sons*. ‘But that one is our key message.’ She scoffs, ‘It’s been six years, finally seems to be getting through.’ *End Conscription, Say No to War in Vietnam* the second sign states. The words are bordered with dagger-like crosses.

‘Tonight, we blanket the town in posters, tomorrow we hand out flyers at the registration point. We need to be prepared for any eventuality.’ Dianne pauses. ‘We know what happened to our chapter in Melbourne. Jailed for wilful trespass. There’s every chance it could happen to us tomorrow, so I hope you’re all prepared.’

In the haze, the women are quiet. It is never spoken that if caught, their nocturnal activities could cause them to lose their jobs, cause their husbands to lose their jobs. They know they are right, but they are still afraid. Before *Save Our Sons*, Natasha had avoided anything remotely political. She refused to even run for secretary on the school P&C just in case it forced an election. Now she is an activist. She wonders what Paul would think if she was arrested and jailed. If the campaign works, it seems a small price to pay to keep her son home. Keep all the sons home.

Dianne grabs her car keys. ‘Gloves and hats ladies. Out of the kitchen and onto the streets.’

The mothers reach for their black gloves, pull dark cloaks and shawls around their shoulders.

‘What about the boys?’ Jean asks.

Natasha glances towards the door, knowing their sons are just beyond them in the garden, probably still discussing the war, fretting, bravado, too young to have a say, old enough to carry a gun.

‘Leave them,’ she says. ‘They have tomorrow. Tonight is ours.’

---

Save Our Sons was a community action group of women and mothers who protested about compulsory conscription in Australia and the war in Vietnam. Chief amongst their complaints was the fact that boys needed to register with the Department of Labour and National Service the year they turned twenty, yet they couldn’t enrol to vote until they were twenty-one. S.O.S was active for seven years from 1965 to 1972.

During this time women across Australia held silent protests and created a network of safe-houses where conscientious objectors and draft resisters alike could be protected while avoiding arrest. Derided by many as naïve and hysterical, they were part of a mass movement and many were verbally abused, arrested and even jailed.

In 1971, the year this story is set, five Save Our Son members were arrested and jailed in Melbourne for the crime of handing out anti-conscription pamphlets while on government property. Their case gave enormous exposure to the movement and by the end of the year Liberal Prime Minister Bill McMahon had announced Australia would withdraw its troops from Vietnam. The following year, the new Labour PM, Gough Whitlam announced the abolition of conscription and with their objective achieved, SOS wound up.

Alice Godwin

# Fin de Siècle

UNDERGROUND WRITERS

# Fin de Siècle

*Alice Godwin*

*Paris, June 1895.*

ANGELIQUE WEAVED HER WAY TOWARDS KATARINA. Her small jaunty hat was balanced precariously on her head; black hair curled tightly and piled high beneath the plumed and feathery creation. She was wearing an emerald green outfit and Katarina noticed the admiring glances Angelique received from the many men that she passed by and knew that Angelique was oblivious to all.

She rose to receive her friend's kisses, laughing as they sat down. The waiter arrived promptly and Katarina ordered two coffees.

*'La muse verte s'il vous plait.'* Angelique added.

'Now?' Katarina asked.

'Why not?'

Katarina reminded herself she was in Paris now, not St Petersburg, and things are very different here. 'You look very well, my dear.' Katarina said, noticing the soft rosy glow lighting up Angelique's face and how dazzling her dark brown eyes were today.

'Life is wonderful *ma chérie*. Truly it is.'

'What has happened since I've been away?'

'Too much of everything. It will take me weeks to tell you.'

'You must start immediately then.'

The waiter returned, placing their coffees on the table, as well as the glass of absinthe, a tiny silver plate with a cube of white sugar, a delicate spoon with artistic slots of silver flame, and a carafe of iced water.

'Last week I went to a celebration of Paul Verlaine, and the great man was there and read three of his wonderful poems.' Angelique said.

'I thought he was dead.'

‘He has been resurrected, obviously. Yet it is plain to see how life has taken its toll on him.’

‘And his many dalliances with absinthe.’ Katarina replied.

Angelique laughed as she prepared her drink, balancing the spoon on the rim of the glass and then gently placing the cube of sugar onto the slotted part of the spoon, then very delicately pouring the iced water slowly over it. The grassy green liquid turned opaque and milky and the familiar anise aroma drifted up, reminding Katarina of her summer estate, and those childhood days when her and her siblings had hidden within the wild fennel, as part of their hide-and-seek games.

‘Debussy played two of his divine pieces on the piano. At one point Verlaine felt weak and had to leave the room but was soon invigorated by all the applause and adoration of his many admirers.’

‘No doubt helped out by some concoction.’ Katarina couldn’t help replying.

‘We must let the geniuses of this world have their follies.’ Angelique leaned over and exclaimed. ‘Last night we went to the most amazing place, I must take you there. Cabaret du Néant. We sat on coffins, waited on by medieval monks, and sipped test tube phials of offerings named after noxious diseases, while pallbearers brought us tiny pastries that looked like amputated limbs. It’s divinely disgusting and so much fun.’

‘Is that why your cheeks are so rosy today? Are you suffering from the beginnings of consumption?’

‘I think that may have more to do with someone I have met.’

‘Someone new already.’ Katarina teased. ‘What happened to Georges Feydeau? I’m sure there was another too, that young artist, Paul?’

‘They were merely flirtations. Georges is terribly amusing but married, and Paul is too obsessed with his Art, and only interested in me becoming his muse. I will not be the artist’s muse again.’ Angelique replied.

‘Who is this new man and when do I meet him?’

‘You’ll meet him tomorrow. He is having a gathering at his Salon. He is a poet and a mystic. I’ve not met anyone like him before. Now you must tell me why your mother demanded you come back home in the middle of the spring season, when there were so many parties to attend.’ Angelique asked.

‘She needed to tell me something so important it could not wait, and then she preceded to allude to it for the next two weeks.’ Katarina answered, ‘Finally, just before I was to leave, she gave me a letter, an introduction letter for me to meet the man she’d like me to marry.’

‘To marry?’

‘Yes. She has made this decision and that is that.’ Katarina laughed gaily; although she wasn’t too sure how she would be able to extricate herself from this apparent *fait accompli*.

‘Is this what happens?’ Angelique asked, intrigued. ‘You are told whom it is you are to marry? Does this man know he has been chosen?’

‘I presume some communication has been made to his family. He apparently resides in Paris, so I’ll no doubt make his acquaintance soon.’

‘Well, let’s hope he is not too old and ugly. Because I could not bear if you were forced to spend your life with some hideous brute.’ Angelique said defiantly.

The night was balmy; the two women fanned themselves inside the carriage as it ambled along the narrow streets. The gaslights flickered and the moths attracted by the glow cavorted and danced around the wrought iron decorations atop the lanterns. Watching them, Katarina wondered if humans weren't that much different from these moths, captivated by the light, dancing under the illusion that this was the center of their universe, when in fact it was nothing of the kind. She wondered how much of life was illusion. The people that captivated us, were they really what they seemed? The paths that we took, or in her case, were chosen for her, did they really lead where we thought they would or was it just self-delusion on a huge order? She felt a melancholy seize her by the throat and she felt breathless and anxious.

'Is everything alright?' Angelique inquired sensing her friend's mood.

Katarina's ash blond hair was coiled above her long neck and strands of ivory pearls hung down her décolletage. Her dress was a beautiful grey-blue silk which matched the colour of her eyes, but her lovely face looked strained.

'It's fine. Just a feeling, it will pass.' Katarina fluttered her fan.

'First of all, we are going to the Club des Hashischins, which has just reopened. Although it is, apparently, not as notorious as the original, then as eleven approaches we will make our way to the salon of my love.' Angelique laughed joyously determined to cajole Katarina's dark mood away. 'And *ma chérie*, I promise you'll find the man that you are destined to marry, not this other imposter. He may even be there tonight.'

The club was located in the cellar of the infamous Café du Rat Mort; amidst the gloom Angelique introduced Katarina to Auguste-Maurice, a playwright and Juliet, an actress. Suspended above the wooden table was an absinthe fountain with six spigots. It allowed a small party to accurately prepare their absinthe all at once with a slow drip of cold water. Other pipes and hookahs were distributed on the various tables that were already overflowing with people. Two other men joined them, but the noise of so many conversations was making it impossible to hear. Katarina sipped her drink and breathed in the thick fumes of the hashish, which covered the small space like an exotic fog. She was glad when Angelique announced it was time to leave. Her mouth was dry and she felt a strange numbness pervading her thoughts, disorientating her, she was pleased to be climbing the stairs and to breathe the fresh air.

The night air dissipated some of her dizziness, as did the walk to 25 Avenue Trudaine, a five-story building with balconies on the higher levels and where the sound of laughter tinkled down. They knocked at the door.

A woman in a dress of vermillion silk beckoned them in, holding a candleholder shaped like a lily. She led the way up the ornate stairs. Flickering shadows played games with their perceptions, so it seemed like spectres danced on the walls and the mirrors reflected opaque shades, mimicking them as they climbed.

Inside the salon was crowded, people animatedly discussing politics; some lounging on couches in more intimate tête-à-têtes, a quartet of musicians played softly in one of the corners. The décor was exotic with sumptuous Turkish rugs beneath their feet, and copper bowls and Egyptian lanterns glinting on the sideboards. Huge palms touched the tall ceilings so it seemed like they had indeed strayed somewhere beyond Paris, and the esoteric paintings which caught the eye and disturbed the mind, implied that the realm they had stepped into was even further afield.

Even the smell was exotic, a mixture of myrrh and frankincense with sweet hints of rose and gardenia, while beneath the familiar undercurrent of hashish swirled. Katarina and Angelique moved through the large room and into a smaller one. Angelique was looking around when a man came behind her, covering her tiny waist with his hands and kissing her on her neck.

‘Stanislas. Let me introduce you to my dearest friend, Countess Katarina Dmitriyev-Mamonov. Katarina, this is the Marquis de Guaita.’

Katarina did a small courtesy and looked into the eyes of the man she had been commanded to marry.

He reached for her hand and kissed it. He had unusual eyes, they were a light blue and she felt they would change depending on the light. There was intensity in the way he gazed back, as though he could discern more than most people. She managed to say something polite and innocuous. He was tall and although there were many men, even within this room, that were more handsome than he—he had that something, a presence, an aura, which made you want to stay looking at him. His hair was light brown, with a golden sheen flowing through it, and his moustache was small and discreet in sharp contrast to the thick moustaches and beards on most of the men.

The night unfolded like a strange dream. She met so many people, but only a few names and faces lingered in her memory. One was Stanislas’s friend and co-founder of his occult order, Gérard Encausse.

‘Call me Papus.’ He said as he kissed Katarina’s gloved fingers. He presented her with an ornate silver goblet of Armagnac. As she inhaled the rich aromatic fumes, her nostrils quivered as though invisible tongues of fire flickered below them.

‘The drink of the esoteric. Are you ready to receive its wisdom?’ Papus whispered, with a low rumbling laugh.

He would join them at various times, adding some witty anecdote, giving her a sly wink, teasing Angelique with risqué suggestions about her admission into the next level of the order. Angelique’s quick retorts made them all laugh.

‘Dear Papus, why do they call Stanislas The Prince?’ Katarina asked. She had heard him addressed as such numerous times.

‘Because he is a Prince.’

‘I thought he is a Marquis.’ She said coquettishly, opening her eyes wide. ‘And now you tell me he is a Prince. I fear I did not curtsy deep enough when I was introduced.’

Papus laughed. ‘He is a Prince of the Ethereal Realm as opposed to one of this Earthly Plane. He is the most learned man of Metaphysics that you will find in Paris, and quite possibly in Europe. Even I, Papus, one who has achieved phenomenal academic attainment, bow to his intellect.’

Katarina looked at where Stanislas was intently talking to an older woman, his hair glowing as though there was a halo around his head. He cut a very dashing figure in his waistcoat of burgundy velvet and cream shirt. She noticed the unusual symbol on the pin of his tie, the cross with the rays of light streaming from it, and the inner pentagram that contained cabbalistic symbols carved in its five corners.

She stood beneath a palm, the large leaves casting a shadow over her. She felt like a tiny moth beating her wings against a cloistered flame, that would burn her if just for one moment, the shields were lifted. She had the weirdest feeling that her life had irre-

trievably changed—there was the Katarina fluttering her fan in her carriage earlier and there was this Katarina, who stood here now in the glow of the Egyptian lanterns—they were subtly but unmistakably altered.

---

In Paris, the 1890s were called the Fin-de-siècle, end of the century. It was a time of exhilarating excitement and eclectic thought, where many believed anything was possible. Paris was full of artists, Degas, van Gogh, Moreau, Toulouse-Lautrec. Debussy was scandalizing music lovers with his revolutionary pieces. Baudelaire and Rimbaud led the Symbolist movement. Yet it was also a time of despair and anxiety, the old-accepted orders were being pushed reluctantly into the modern world and old ways of thinking were being seriously challenged. The fin de siècle expressed an apocalyptic sense of the end of a phase of civilisation. This is perhaps best exemplified in Munch's *The Scream* that was painted during this period.

Magic was everywhere from Eliphas Lévi to the Order of the Golden Dawn, to the widespread use of Tarot cards. Absinthe was the drink of the decade. Marquis Stanislas de Guaita, was a poet and student of esotericism, and his Parisian apartment became well known as a meeting place for artists, poets, as well as those interested in Mysticism and the Occult. In 1888 with two friends he founded the Cabbalistic order of the Rosicrucians.

Chrissie Bellbrae

When  
Collingwood  
Calls

UNDERGROUND WRITERS

# When Collingwood Calls

*Chrissie Bellbrae*

**B**ILLY HURDLED A MANGY DOG AND dodged a lamppost as fast as his skinny legs would carry him. Sergeant Woods's whistle rang out but Billy kept going, glancing over his shoulder as the copper dropped further behind. With legs burning, he sprinted the last stretch of lane and legged it over the fence to his favourite hiding spot at the rear of the Johnston Street shops. He peered through a hole in the corrugated iron. Woods was bent over with his hands on his knees, puffing.

'Bloody little bugger!'

Billy smirked. *Too slow Woodsy!* A sharp stab of dislodged bluestone gutter dug into his soles, the shoe leather worn through. His father would've clobbered him for not seeing to it—if he were still around. But William Price was in the lock-up again. As the eldest, it was up to Billy to take care of his three brothers. He had promised his mother.

*She's been gone a week now.* Billy shivered. In winter his mitts grew three times the size. He took out the rusty knife he'd found near the foundry and gouged it into the dirt. Mother said busy hands helped circulation, but despite the miserable potatoes she'd peeled for her family, her hands had remained swollen and marked with chilblains until her death. *She did her best.* But her body had finally given in, wearied from birthing too many babies that never drew a breath, in the hovel the Prices called home. Benevolent do-gooders circled like crows, crowding the two dark rooms beneath a holey tin roof, offering charity. Well—authorities might be rounding up kids for the Gordon Home farms, but Billy was damned sure no son of Nellie Price would end up on one.

He blew a puff of breath into his hands. *Sergeant Woods isn't all bad.* He occasionally

turned a blind eye to shifty deals done down the lanes. *Still.* With a glance to make sure the coast was clear, Billy climbed out. He'd cut his teeth in Collingwood—his education garnered on the streets where air hung thick with smoke and constant fumes streamed from tall funnels of industry. Men queued for employment outside factory gates each morning, but a day's wage was barely sufficient to feed a family. The Prices scraped by as best they could. William Price's illustrious criminal record marred him from work, but his plunder occasionally helped fill their stomachs. While his brothers were at school, Billy would scrounge the scrapheap for some small treasure to sell, but it was never enough.

He cocked his ear to the sound coming from the streets: the crowd was headed to Victoria Park eager for a Collingwood win to take their minds off their troubles. Billy knew an opportunity when he saw it. Ties to Collingwood ran deep. Recalling a conversation he'd overheard when his father's beer-addled tongue ran loose, Billy wondered if it were true. Price had bragged that, "Wren owed him one." *Perhaps Mr Wren could use a boy at the Tote to do the running?*

Following the throng of people, Billy slipped inside the gates of the football ground, spotting him immediately. Larger than life, John Wren's physical presence commanded attention.

Billy's stomach twisted—a mixture of nerves and hunger. Would Wren remember his promise? Straightening up, he marched forward, the energy of the cheering crowd making him feel braver, bolder.

Billy ducked elbows and extended his hand. 'The name's Price, sir. I'm head of the family now. I'm fast, and a quick learner. I'm just the man you need.'

Wren laughed, placing his hands on his hips as Billy held his gaze. 'Cripes! Is that right? At your age, your father and I stood side by side on the floor of the boot factory!'

Billy's father wasn't ambitious like Wren—nor half as clever. The petty criminal lived off the back of other people's riches while John Wren had made his own luck. Wren bet his savings on a horse that had won the Melbourne Cup, setting up the Tote from the back of a teashop with his winnings. Amongst his varied business pursuits he'd also invested in the Collingwood Football Club.

'He said he looked out for your brother,' Billy hesitated.

'That he did,' Wren replied, lowering his voice. 'But the less said about time served in Melbourne Gaol, the better. Come back once we've beaten this rabble and I'll hear what you have to say. I like your style, kid.'

Billy watched the game chewing his nails to the quick. Collingwood inched forward but the Bloods kept coming. With the clock running out, Billy's hero Dick Lee lined up in front of goal. Billy closed his eyes. *If he kicks this, I'll get the job.* He held his breath and waited...

A collective cheer rose from the crowd as the siren sounded. Wren's man came for him.

'If you've half the mettle of this team, you'll do well,' Wren beamed. 'Take pride in your work and work hard. Your best is all I ask.'

Billy swallowed a lump in his throat. *Mother would never have approved.* But what choice did he have? Many families from the slums relied upon Wren's support. A penny spent on the right horse meant food for a week if the odds were good enough.

'It's no mean feat to look out for your family. I admire your sense of obligation.' Wren held out his hand. 'And having the balls to recoup a debt that's due.' Billy gulped. He hoped he was up for the challenge.

Billy had spunk and nouse. Working for Wren wasn't easy, but he was a fair and decent employer. Billy swept floors, packed shelves and counted coin. He ran messages and watched Wren's every move. He swapped street slang for Wren's vernacular, mimicking words and copying his mannerisms. Billy lapped up praise and asked questions. His thirst for knowledge grew.

'Can you teach me those figures, sir?' he asked one day, eager to keep in Wren's good books.

'When you're a few inches taller.' Wren replied. Billy was disappointed, but darted off like a greyhound to finish the task given to him. Each week he'd ask again.

'Keep your nose clean and we'll make a man of you. There's a good lad,' Wren ruffled his hair. 'Can't be too hasty, that's how mistakes are made. Let's finish up here—it's time for the footy. We don't want to miss the game.'

Billy nodded. Mr Wren knew best. But one day Billy would be rich enough to live in a mansion in the leafy suburb of Kew too. Across the Yarra, no one would dare suggest sending his brothers to work on any Gordon Home farm.

Wren's men knew how to handle themselves, but the Tote was dogged by constant interference. Everyone was on tenterhooks, waiting for the local constabulary to swoop.

'Clean up this crap Price, or it's off to the Home with you,' Wren barked one afternoon. Billy stood with his mouth open.

'Don't take it to heart.' The bookie muttered, ushering Billy clear. 'It's that copper Woodsy who's bothering the boss. He's a tough nut to crack. Most coppers demand to be on the take. Not him!'

Wren had no luck with Sergeant Woods at all. Various forms of bribery had been offered—a cut of the Collingwood takings, even tickets to the grand final. But Woods wasn't interested. He told Wren "he was a Fitzroy man, and if he wanted a ticket to the footy he'd buy one himself."

Horseracing had diversified Wren's interests, but the Tote was the last bastion of illegal industry. It was rumoured Wren would close it down to focus on his political aspirations—to follow the path to respectability. Those who spent their hard earned at the Tote would be disappointed. And then what would Billy do?

'Oi! Pricey!' The head bookie shouted, replacing the telephone on the wall. 'Two coppers are headed this way! Quick! Get them slips out of here!' Billy pushed the tiny pieces of paper into a canvas bag that he slung across his body beneath his thin shirt.

'Stay away 'til the coast's clear,' warned another with a rollie hanging from his lips, 'or they'll nab you for those farms before you can blink!' Billy's heart raced as he made his way to his usual hiding spot, and wedged into the ditch with one eye pressed to the hole in the fence.

Moments later, a rangy man in a plaid peak cap fled down the lane, stopping at the fence opposite. *Cripes, the coppers are after him too.* With one hand securing the cap to his head, the man hurdled his long torso over the fence and disappeared. A small leather pouch dropped on the dirt behind him. Billy couldn't resist. Quick as a flash, he checked the lane and darted out of his hiding spot to retrieve it.

Billy hesitated before retracing his steps, dazed by the weight of more gold coins than he had ever earned, cradled in his palms. His stomach lurched. The stout figure of Sergeant Woods turned into the lane and raised his hand.

Billy looked away, sizing up the gap in the fence where two planks of wood swung loose. A trail of water led to Mrs Cottee's laundry. He had to get there first. He clambered through the palings and into Mrs Cottee's yard. Clothes hung from ropes strung between the two side fences.

'Watch out boy!' she yelled as Billy dodged a billowing sheet of greyed washing. 'What are you up to?'

'Please Missus!' he answered. 'Don't squeal on me.' Mollified by her nod, Billy hid alongside the wood shed. He emptied the coins into his pockets and threw the pouch away. It was bad enough to be caught with betting slips, but theft was far worse.

'You seen anyone?' A deep voice called from the rear lane. Billy flattened against the fence.

'No, love,' she answered, slowly pegging up a pair of trousers. 'Just me and my never-ending basket of laundry. Who you after?'

'Young Billy Price. D'you know him? I'm sure he went this way...' The sergeant's head popped up—his face was bloated and puffy. Nut brown eyes raked the yard.

'They're buggers of kids those Price boys,' Billy frowned as Mrs Cottee chuckled. 'All look the same to me. Best you get on after him.'

'We'll be paying the Prices a visit,' Woods's deep voice continued from the other side of the fence. 'The old man isn't around and I reckon the boys are skipping school. We need to throw our weight around—get those younger ones taken care of before they all end up on the streets. It'll do them no favours.'

Billy strained to listen until the footfall faded. *Gotta get the slips back.* When the sergeant's whistle was silent, Mrs Cottee gave Billy a wink, nodding at the gap beside her woodshed to aid his escape. His senses were alert as adrenalin pumped through his veins. With a smile he patted the coins in his pocket and exhaled a breath before checking the lane again.

*Woodsy will have to be quicker to catch me!* With confidence brimming he jumped the fence and zigzagged the bluestone lanes, making his way down Sackville Street with a smile. The coins were assurance the Price boys would never be used as cheap labour through any Gordon Homes program.

Billy turned the corner to the Tote and halted.

'Where d'you think you're going?'

Sergeant Woods stood blocking the gate with his arms folded. A crunch of stones signalled a second man nearby.

Billy searched left and then right, calculating the time needed to scale the fence.

'Too late, son,' Woods responded, acknowledging his attempted escape route. 'I know you're hiding something. Hand it over.'

'You're not going to fleece me are you, Sarge?' Billy grumbled, shuffling from one foot to the other.

Woods stepped forward with his hand out. 'It's time we had a talk down at the station. Come now, Billy. Don't be giving me trouble or I'll box your ears. There's a good lad.'

*Cripes!* Billy thought, shaking his head. *Now I'm for it!*

They turned in the direction of the station. Billy took a deep breath, and in one desperate movement launched a flying leap at the fence. As his diminutive frame slipped like quicksilver over the palings, Sergeant Woods stood scratching his head.

And once again Billy Price was out of reach.

---

**John Wren** was a local legend—a sporting entrepreneur, racehorse owner, land speculator and Collingwood Football Club patron. He unsuccessfully sued Australian novelist Frank Hardy for criminal libel, after he was allegedly portrayed as John West, in the 1950 bestselling novel: *Power Without Glory*.

**The Gordon Institute**, established in 1886, aimed to rid the streets of “neglected” children and rescue them from the kind of larrikinism prevalent in the city of Melbourne. It was founded to prevent children from falling into crime as a form of survival.

*‘The lad must, first of all, be properly fed and housed, which is generally a new experience for him; further, he must be taken regularly to the employers’ Church and its Sunday School, and be placed under the pastoral care of the employer’s clergyman. Intoxicating drinks and tobacco are prohibited as far as possible, as along the lines of these evils so many lads walk and fall.’*  
(Finding Records 2016).

It provided places for boys aged 5–14, generally securing work placements for boys on farms. The institute also offered classes and a place for youths to socialise.

It continued in various forms as children’s care or residential homes until early 2020.

Australian Dictionary of Biography. n.d. Wren, John (1871–1953).

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wren-john-9198>

Collingwood Historical Society. 2016. John Wren.

<https://collingwoodhs.org.au/view/collingwood-notables/entry/215/>

Finding Records. 2016. Gordon Institute.

<https://www.findingrecords.dhhs.vic.gov.au/collectionresultspage/GordonInstitute>

Saanjana Kapoor

**Babushka  
Doll**

UNDERGROUND WRITERS

# Babushka Doll

*Saanjana Kapoor*

I drape my maiden name like a pageant sash, the bare walls lean forward  
the women's nimble arms move like plucked harp strings to serve the chai  
I take a sip and the man across the table says yes  
six months later, at the pandit's first mantra, my bones stiffen  
I'm a reverse babushka doll  
cut me open  
and nestled in my ribcage is my mother  
dressed in a crisp pink sari    branded in sindoor    whispering  
to tear my celluloid dreams I stitched from rental DVDs and cassette tapes    before I'm exiled  
cut her open  
and there lies my grandmother    much younger    her loose braid threaded with incense  
her nuptial necklace worth more than she is  
I feel them quiver when the sonogram arrives    they know before the doctor does  
they rattle inside me until  
I imagine him holding her like he holds the bottles he drains  
and then selling her off at twenty-three for his suburban dreams  
a cushioned mattress, a tiled bathroom, an air-conditioned car— no  
she'll be a reverse babushka doll  
don't you see?  
I'm breaking this cycle by letting her die inside of me.

---

'Babushka Doll' is a fictional poem following a young middle-class woman living in Ambala, India in the 90s. The piece explores gendered social issues such as arranged marriage and sex-selective abortions — an illegal but relatively common practice, especially in regional towns, where male children are preferred over females for continuing the family's lineage.

Mark J. Keenan

Time and  
Tide

UNDERGROUND WRITERS

# Time and Tide

*Mark J. Keenan*

FLORENCE HAD NEVER BEEN TO THE outback, though she had heard stories about the harshness of the land and the dangers of the weather. She thought about these as she moved along the crowded jetty, holding tight to the young boy's hand. The sea breeze was heavy with the smell of freshly caught fish and smoke from the stack of the steamship. The harbour waters were calm as the mid-morning sun glinted off the surface into her eyes. Her other hand clung to a small case which held her most precious belongings: writing implements and paper; a gilded mirror, recently received as a gift for her twenty-first birthday from her mother; and her favourite dress, high-waisted and perfect for dancing. Florence did not expect she would get the opportunity to wear the dress where they were headed, but she had packed it all the same.

'Florrie.' Thomas stopped beside her when she came to a halt at the bottom of the gangway. He seemed untroubled by the crowd, his blue eyes looking up at her from beneath his cap.

'Yes, Master Thomas?' She knew better than to call him Thomas or Tommy. Even though she'd given permission to the six-year-old to use the name her friends all called her. Perhaps at some future time, but not now when they were so new to each other.

'Have you ever been to sea, Florrie?' Thomas asked.

Florence's gut tightened. 'Yes.' She stopped herself from releasing his hand and clutching at her stomach.

'It's wonderful, isn't it.' Thomas smiled and swung her arm back and forth with his. 'Unless you get ill or cannot find your sea legs.'

Florence closed her eyes for a moment, feeling dizzy. Her previous voyage had been with her mother and siblings. It had been six months after their father had passed when they had left London for Fremantle. She had been uneasy then too.

Thomas squeezed her hand. 'But you'll be great, Florrie, we both will.'

Florence laughed. The wonder of children. For a moment, the anxiety quieted and she felt the adventure of it all. Going to the outback to live and to work—the things she might see. The steep tides. The staircase to the moon. The mighty boab.

'My grandson will be staying with me in my saloon cabin.' They had reached the top of the gangway. Mrs Sack was talking to a bearded gentleman in a pressed uniform and embroidered hat.

'Ma'am, there is only one bunk in the room, not two. Are you sure?' the man said.

'We will make do,' Mrs Sack replied.

Mrs Sack was an imposing figure. Not tall, but broad. Her face firm, but not hard. Florence thought the Captain was right, Mrs Sack would not fit in the bed alongside the young boy. Still, there'd been no stateroom cabins available when they arrived at the wharf. It had only been through the generosity of a young gentleman they were boarding at all. He had overheard Mrs Sack's conversation at the payment counter and given her his ticket, affording her and Thomas a single bunk in a shared stateroom. He had insisted his business up north could wait until next week.

'As you wish, Ma'am.' The man waved them through and onto the ship.

'May I stay with Florrie please, Grandmother? Just for a little while. Until we exit Gage Roads.'

Mrs Sack's face softened. Florence thought she might even look relieved. 'You can bring him to me at teatime, Miss Price. Perhaps by then he will be weary enough that I can handle his boisterousness.'

'Of course, Mrs Sack.' Florrie was glad. It would be nice to have company for the start of the voyage, the journey to her new life in Derby. For a moment, she wondered at the roads he had mentioned. Shaking her head, she followed Thomas towards the bow.

After the sun had set, Florence had taken Thomas to First Class, where Mrs Sack said she would be. The lounge was furnished with walnut chairs and tables, the walls lined with bevelled glass bookcases. Florence tried not to fidget as the concierge scanned his list of names.

'Mrs Sack does appear to have listed you as her guest, Miss Price,' he said, 'She is in the dining room, if you would care to follow me.'

Florence and Tommy walked behind him.

'I told you. Grandma is in charge, everyone does as she says,' Thomas said. 'Even Grandpa.'

Florence wondered how this could be. A woman's place was in the home, either her own or someone else's. Running a business, much less a hotel, was unthinkable. Still, Florence believed him. Mrs Sack commanded respect. Florence had marvelled at the way the other people onboard the ship had treated her. There was power in controlling the flow of beer in an outback town.

'Pa's been teaching me to swim,' Thomas continued, changing topics as fast as only a child can. 'He hasn't had much time lately, but I know I'm getting good.'

'Where do you practice?' Florence asked. 'Surely not in the sea?'

'No, I'm not ready for that,' Thomas laughed. 'We have a dam not far from our home. Evelyn comes with me sometimes.'

'Your sister?'

Thomas nodded.

‘Shall we play a game of rummy after supper?’ Florence asked. ‘And then you can teach me about the principles of swimming.’

‘Okay. Don’t forget to walk like me, so you get your sea legs.’ Thomas widened his stance, walking like a cowboy who’d returned from a long day in the saddle. ‘Come on, Florrie,’ he giggled and waddled down the steps.

Checking no one was behind her, Florence replicated his posture and followed him down the final few stairs, smiling and laughing herself.

Florence spent most of the following days with Thomas. Mrs Sack seemed content to spend time alone reading in her stateroom or drinking tea in the dining room.

The pair would talk and play games on the outside deck until supper, but today the skies had become overcast, forcing them to retreat to the dining room before the rain started.

‘Calm or storm, it’s best to press on. We are already late, if we miss this high tide we will be here at least another twelve hours.’ Florence had overheard an elderly gentleman sitting at the bar say to his drinking companion.

‘Is it always this rough?’ Florence asked, snatching up the fountain pen before it rolled over the table edge.

‘Sometimes rougher,’ Thomas said. ‘Do you like my drawing?’

Florence steadied herself as the ship rolled in the swell, the thought of it remaining afloat in harsher conditions doing little to ease her queasiness.

‘Yes, I do.’ Florrie pointed at the female looking figure in his sketch. ‘Is that me?’

‘Yes. And me. And Grandma. And Evelyn, even though she’s not here.’ Thomas grinned. ‘And the Koombana.’

He had drawn the ship next to the jetty, sitting high up on the mud, the tide out, as it had been yesterday in Port Hedland. The movement of the sea, in concert with the moon, had decided when they had reboarded and continued the journey north.

She folded up her sheet of paper, placing it and her pen in her bag.

‘Aren’t you going to write your letter, Florrie?’

‘No, I think I will write later.’ Through the porthole, the ocean was veiled by sheeting rain, a chaotic wash of greys and blues.

‘Perhaps you can write when we arrive home.’

‘Yes, perhaps.’

Where was home now? she wondered. In Beverley, where she’d worked after they first arrived? In Leederville with mother? Or back in Gloucestershire?

After a time, Tommy quit drawing, his small fingers unable to keep the pencils steady as the vessel pitched and rolled. Florence smiled at him and talked of where she had grown up. She hoped her descriptions of snow-capped houses and icy streams would take his mind, and hers, away from the increasing ferocity of the weather outside.

The door to the dining room opened and the cabin boy entered. He was wet from head to toe. He closed the door against the squall outside.

‘Cap’n says everyone’s to stay put. No walking on deck. Storm’s getting worse,’ he announced.

‘I need to return to my cabin, to my wife.’ The elderly gentleman from the bar marched towards the boy and the door. Several passengers muttered under their breath while others rose from their chairs hastily to leave.

‘Sorry, sir. Cap’n says you got to stay put.’

As the man argued with the boy, Florence turned her attention to Tommy.

‘I’m sure your Grandma will be safe, and you too,’ she said. ‘It’s a new ship, first rate.’

‘I know,’ Tommy looked up briefly, his hands gripping the edge of the table. ‘And I have you to look after me.’

Over the next half hour, the weather intensified. The horizon disappeared behind menacing cliffs of seawater and torrential rain. Some of the waves reached the portholes, slamming against the door. Florence wrapped her arms around Thomas, as he clutched at his drawing and pencils.

The cabin boy left the room to seek further instructions. When he returned, dishevelled and out of breath, he instructed them to follow him to the lifeboats.

Florence took a deep breath and pried the pencils from Tommy’s fingers. ‘We can leave these here but bring your picture with you to show your Grandma.’

Leading Tommy by his hand, she followed the other passengers from the dining room on the promenade deck, up to the bridge where the lifeboats were stored.

The ship pitched and rolled, rising and falling in the swell, a hostage to the storm.

‘We are nearly there,’ Florence shouted to Thomas, her words drowned by the cacophony of creaking metal as the ocean pounded the steamship. Florence hoped they were going the right way. She hadn’t seen Mrs Sack.

‘Florrie,’ the little boy’s lip quivered as he leaned into her chest, ‘I’m scared.’

The ship lurched again. Florence gripped Thomas tight to stop him crashing against the steel wall of the bulkhead. Her other hand steadied them on the stairway railing as sea water slammed onto the deck below. Wind whipped at her face and the salt spray stung her eyes, but she dared not let go to wipe them. Her tongue swelled with the taste of salt. All around the ocean was heaving, white caps cutting across ridges of deep green walls of water.

‘This way.’ A young steward directed them off the stairs and towards the rear. The ship heaved as she let go of the railing and Florence was flung against a steel column. She touched her forehead and looked at her hand. A mix of seawater and blood coated her fingers.

Florence squinted into the rain.

‘Grandma!’ Thomas yelled and let go of Florence. He ran towards Mrs Sack. She was leaning over the railing at the rear of a group of passengers.

‘Thomas!’ Florence called after him, pulling on the rail and following him. ‘Be careful.’

Behind her, she felt the stern of the ship arc upwards and into a wave. Thomas’s feet slid from beneath him as water smashed into Florence, hammering her into the bulkhead. Her vision fading as she fell to the deck.

Florence opened her eyes and pushed herself up against the railing, circling the handrail with both her arms. Thomas and Mrs Sack were no longer visible. There were others missing too. One of the crew was yelling as he cast a life buoy off the side of the ship.

Florence peered overboard.

Arms flailed above the raging sea, grabbing at life. Thomas was visible for a moment, before he slipped beneath a rush of waves. She could not see Mrs Sack at all.

‘Help him!’ Florence cried out to the crewman.

The vessel pitched, water flooding the deck. Her hands gripped tight as the ship

shuddered and groaned. The ocean continued to pound the ship relentlessly, a raging leviathan intent on destruction. Below, the surface of the water writhed with foam and swell where she had last seen Thomas.

She clawed at the handrail, struggling to keep her footing as the deck buckled, the screech of folding metal overwhelming her senses. Florence lost her grip, falling towards the menacing ocean, her screams carried away in the howling wind.

---

The S.S. Koombana, along with her 156 passengers and crew, were lost at sea in March 1912, off the coast of Western Australia. On board was my great-great-grandmother, Louisa Sack. Louisa was returning to Derby with her six-year-old grandson, Thomas Crotty, after visiting her daughter, who had recently given birth to twins. Also travelling with them was Florence Price, who had recently been hired by Louisa as a domestic help. Florence had migrated to Australia three years prior with her widowed mother and siblings. She had recently turned twenty-one.

The historical information for this short story has been taken from several sources. This includes Ancestry, for some of the background information on the characters, and Trove, for newspaper reports and articles on the Koombana. Of immense help was *Koombana Days* by Annie Boyd—a fantastic book which examines the ship, the passengers and crew, and Western Australia at the time leading up to, and after, the disaster. I am indebted to Annie Boyd for her incredible research, which opened my eyes to the enormity of this maritime tragedy for my ancestors, and for others like Florence and her family.

## Issue 33: Historical Fiction Contributors

### Shannon Meyerkort

#### *The Mothers' Group*

---

Shannon Meyerkort is a West Australian author with a focus on historical fiction inspired by real stories. She has written prize-winning short stories and is currently working on two novel manuscripts. She was awarded a place on the 2020 Four Centres Emerging Writers Program.

### Alice Godwin

#### *Fin de Siècle*

---

Alice Godwin was born in Tasmania, a Grimm's fairy tale place. She has had thirty or so short stories published in magazines, anthologies, and literary journals in Australia, USA and UK. She won the Australian Horror Writers Assoc short story of the year (2008), Wyvern Publications UK YA short story competition and been shortlisted for the Irish Aeon Award. Her cyber fantasy novella is due to be published in 2021. She now lives in Sydney, where she tends her herbs by moonlight and is working on a book series on magic and synchronicity. You can find her website at [www.alicegodwin.com](http://www.alicegodwin.com).

### Chrissie Bellbrae

#### *When Collingwood Calls*

---

After a lifetime in the city of Melbourne, I was lured to the sea and the coast of Victoria, where I live with my husband and faithful four-legged friend, Harvey. A passion for food and wine accompany my love of a great story. And yes, I confess—I barrack for Collingwood! I enjoy a sea breeze, the sound of the ocean and the comforts of an open fire with a Beechworth chardonnay or McLaren Vale shiraz. The works of Kate Morton, Kate Forsyth and Kayte Nunn reflect my preference for historical fiction and inspire my desire to write Australian-based narratives.

## Saanjana Kapoor

### *Babushka Doll*

---

Saanjana Kapoor is a part-time writer and full-time Bollywood fanatic. Her writing has been published in Voiceworks and performed at The Future Echoes Festival. She currently sub-edits for Farrago Magazine.

## Mark J. Keenan

### *Time and Tide*

---

Mark has always loved stories. The way they can bring joy and inspiration, sadness and heartbreak. And everything between. As a child growing up in country Western Australia, books were Mark's escape, and written words were his expression. However, they took a back-seat when Mark decided to pursue a different career path. Now, after decades working in the engineering sector, he has returned to writing. And it feels like home. Mark is currently working on a manuscript for a full-length novel set in 1958 in Bassendean, Western Australia. Mark's website is [www.markjkeenan.com](http://www.markjkeenan.com) and he is also on Facebook as Mark J. Keenan.

## Naomi Hurrey

### *Cover Illustration*

---

Naomi Hurrey is an illustrator based in Brisbane, Queensland. She enjoys historical costume, elves, chickens, and elves in historical costume. She graduated from Griffith University with a Bachelor of Animation (majoring in Art Direction) in 2018. Currently she works days as a scientific illustrator and nights as a freelance illustrator and concept artist. Naomi can be found on most social media under her handle [@chickenhawke](https://twitter.com/chickenhawke).



**Contact**

Support Underground Writers on **Patreon**

**[www.underground-writers.org](http://www.underground-writers.org)**

Twitter: **@undergroundWA**

Instagram: **@undergroundwriters**

Follow us on **Facebook**

Subscribe on **YouTube**

For general enquiries: **[queries@underground-writers.org](mailto:queries@underground-writers.org)**

Submit your work: **[submissions@underground-writers.org](mailto:submissions@underground-writers.org)**



UNDERGROUND WRITERS