

Recreating Past Lives

It is fun to imagine what would have happened to many of our major literary heroines if they lived today. Tolstoy in Anna Karenina wrote about every unhappy family as being ‘unhappy in its own way’. But I have always been fascinated by the idea that if Anna Karenina was alive now, she would have left that dreary husband and set up a new household with Count Vronsky without even bothering to remarry. It was Anna’s bad luck to be born a century too soon. The same can be said about Jane Eyre. These days a white and middle-class Jane would have had a better chance of being fostered out to a caring family and then with her excellent intellect, moved into an academic career. None of Jane Austen’s mothers would have been as desperate to marry off their daughters. The Bronte girls would most probably have left home and with their flair for language, gone into advertising or PR. Fortunately for us, the more dysfunctional their lives were, the better it is for us. Nor can we afford to be too complaisant. Even now, if we consider the numbers of professionals who deal with miserable and dysfunctional people it would seem that few of us can escape our growing up years without scarring, whether at home or at school.

Most families have stories about members who suffered because they lived in less sympathetic times. My own family tree has a history of profound depression that has debilitated at least one member of almost every generation. If those relatives had been lucky enough to be here today, they would have been fed Prozac or some chemical equivalent that would have helped them lead happier, more productive lives. Because I came from this kind of family and because I am naturally inquisitive, I have always made a point of listening into others discuss their family failings. And it may have been those stories that

struck the first spark and led to the character of Lilbet. My husband had four aunts who never married and who lived together until they died. They loved and squabbled and protected each other with equal determination. One aunt was mildly spastic and deeply resentful of both her affliction and the way - back in those days - the disadvantaged were treated. She often said that she wished that she had never been allowed to survive. In truth, until quite recently anyone unfortunate enough to be disabled was regarded as mentally retarded. If not mentally retarded, as some one who should be treated with kid gloves and not permitted to given any independence. Their sexuality was either ignored or seen as a no-way area, intimacy discouraged

Lilbet, my protagonist in Body and Soul, wants nothing more than to be respected by her father and the outside world. What made things even harder for her was that the thirties was a time when the pseudo –science of eugenics flourished; a pseudo –science that advocated These days some of her spasticity would have been successfully treated, and she would have been encouraged to live a more normal existence. When she went down in family legend as someone to whom *nothing ever happened* I took on the challenge of *making something happen*.

Set in the summer and autumn of 1938, **Body and Soul: Libby's Romance**, a Young Adult novel is eighteen-year-old disabled Lilbet Mark's account of the love affair between Felix Goldfarb, a recent migrant to Melbourne, and Lilbet's twin-sister Ella. As Lilbet records the day to day events that occur in Adeline Terrace, she explores Australia heading towards World War 2, the intolerance once shown towards the disabled, the ambivalence she feels towards her family, and the double edged sword of love and envy.

But is Lilbet as badly done by, as she would have us believe?

Authors have a lot of fun creating disagreeable people. Perhaps this is one way they rid themselves of their less pleasant feelings towards the world. In Lilbet, I created a character who exists in a frighteningly constricted environment. Partially disabled and therefore treated as a dependent needing constant care and attention, she must manipulate her family to suit herself – a task she accomplishes altogether too successfully. In this novel I am aware of being ‘politically incorrect’. I tried to create more fully rounded characters by stepping aside from the conventional view that anyone disadvantaged will always be ‘nice’. And because Lilbet’s family are altogether too trusting and innocent - much like many Australians were in the first part of the 20th century- they are totally charmed by sophisticated and worldly wise Felix.

This meant lots of research into pre WW 2 Australia. Delving into old newspapers preserved in our State Public Library on microfiche, I uncovered a world so different from our own, it seemed a terrible waste not to share it. Thus the novel contains actual snippets from *The Argus*, *The Sun*, *The Herald* and *The Age* (September 1937- June 1938). Here are a few:

The AGE Newspaper. 7th September, 1938

HITLER REPEATS DEMANDS FOR COLONIES.

Economic distress dictated Germany’s claim for colonies,’ said Herr Hitler in a proclamation which was read at the opening of the national Socialist Congress at Nuremberg today. Herr Hitler was given a tumultuous reception, both when he arrived by air to Nuremberg and when he mounted the platform at the opening of the congress.

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The ARGUS Newspaper. 29th December, 1937

GAY END TO 1937. Many Festivities Arranged.

Melbourne has set the stage for the merriest and brightest New Year in its history. Most of the city and metropolitan theatres and dance halls will hold gala performances. At St. Kilda the foreshore will be brightened by a fireworks display.

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THE SUN NEWSPAPER: 3rd January, 1938

NEW TIVOLI. The Home of Variety

Frank Neil presents the greatest variety acts EVER SEEN AT THE TIVOLI headed by famous stage and screen star NINA MAE McKINNLEY. Also performing will be ROY RENE MO and the inimitable Jack Ryans and his Dancing Festival.

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And my favourite:

THE ARGUS NEWSPAPER: 28th January, 1938

THE WORLD OF WOMEN. Everyday Problems.

Will you please repeat in your columns the directions for stiffening a crochet basket with sugar. 'Newly Wed.' Camberwell.

To make stiffening for six baskets take one half cupful of icing sugar and enough water to make a thick syrup. Cook this mixture until it is thick, then place the baskets inside. Stir them around with a fork until thoroughly saturated. Then run a string through the handles and hang them in a cool place to dry.

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I already had some experience in recreating history. *Mavis Road Medley*(1991) is set in 1933.*My Story: Surviving Sydney cove*(2000) in 1790. is one of a number of diaries published by Scholastics UK. When I began researching this novel, I found that I knew very little about our first European settlers. The more I read, the more I was struck by the difficulties the First Fleet

suffered. I was particularly interested in that period of total isolation between April when the Sirius foundered off Norfolk Island and the coming of the 2nd Fleet in June. My research took me to many different sources, in particular Watkin Tench's diaries, and Captain Phillip's letters. The language might be archaic, but the contents struck a very modern note. Phillip's reasoning for sending Lieutenant Ross to Norfolk Island are not dissimilar from a contemporary CEO sending his difficult 2IC to an inaccessible branch of that same business. WatkinTench could rarely remark on any person or incident without adding some sardonic comment of his own. They talk of 'Opened up a elderly convict's belly and found it empty.' 'Convicts refusing to share cooking pots.' 'A woman dying of over eating by consuming all her rations in one meal.'

Provisions were running out and their first attempts at farming had failed. Governor Phillip had placed everyone- freeman and convict alike - on starvation rations. What they desperately craved was what they perceived as 'real food': that is pickled pork, mutton, and ships biscuits. With too few muskets to go around, fishing boats or lines, or a willingness to learn from the local 'indians', hunger prevailed. Meanwhile, as the historian Alan Frost points out, they were surrounded by a profusion of seafood, wild game, and Vitamin C iron-rich wild spinach and sarsaparilla. Perhaps this helped them survive. The evidence lies in the astonishing number of women that became pregnant. To become pregnant they had to be menstruating. It is also interesting to note that significantly fewer children died than if they had stayed in England's appalling 18th Century cities.

In *Body and Soul* I wanted to lead my readers into a different world, yet make that world utterly convincing. Sixty-five years later, some of our moral dilemmas appear to have changed, though some are universal. But syntax and vocabulary have altered. My problem was how to achieve a thirties 'voice'

without becoming too wordy. And I needed to use historical facts without letting them intrude into the fictional flow. All this meant lots of reading of the literature of the time. And much rewriting. I also took certain liberties in that that the true 'Lilbet' would have been far older than eighteen in 1938, but then 1938 was such an interesting year.

Writers are often chastised for writing about the past instead of the immediate present - as if only 21st Century problems are relevant. Nevertheless I agree with those who argue that 'those who are ignorant of history are destined to repeat it'. How often I have wished for the ability to time-travel into the past, to be able to reverse certain decisions and make things work out differently. My solution is to delve into history, and to hope that by presenting it as a story, that maybe I can interest one reader into looking beyond the immediate present and to see life as the continuum that it surely is.

Because I drew on family history, when I first started writing, I wondered if my husband's aunt would mind me using her in this rather arbitrary way. After all, we had barely known each other. The answer came unexpectedly. I was browsing through a friend's old bookcase wondering what Lilbet might be reading in 1938 and found a tattered copy of Pearl Buck's The Good Earth. To my astonishment, what I found inside the cover leaf was that aunt's signature. I have always seen this as a sign that she wanted me to write her story and had given me her blessing.

BODY AND SOUL. Indra Publishing: August 2003 www.indra.com.au