

## INTERVIEW WITH HELEN ROSS CHILDREN'S AUTHOR AND BLOGGER

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### **Did you always want to be a writer?**

I don't think I realised this consciously until I hit my early 20's. I remember thinking when things went wrong 'one day I will write about this.' However I was always a confirmed/dedicated/compulsive-obsessive reader.

### **When did you start writing?**

I was already in my early 40's when I started creating short stories, many based on incidents in my own life. They weren't very good but they gave me the 'writing bug.'

### **What genres do you write in/or have written in?**

I have had 65 books published. I write everything except erotica, or 'Tolkien' style fantasy. Here are some examples of what I have written: contemporary fantasy (*eSide*), science fiction (*Alley-Cat*, *Starship Q*, *Cowpat\$*), history (*Mavis Road Medley*, *Body and Soul*, *Surviving Sydney Cove*, *Gallipoli Medals*, *The Youngest Cameleer*) magical realism (*Trapeze*), mystery (*Hedgeburners: An A-Z PI Mystery*, my two adult murder mysteries *UnJust Desserts & UnKind Cut*), three collections of ten short stories (*Killer Virus*, *My Horrible Cousins*, *Space Footy*) plus lots of non fiction, the latest being the series *Health and Understanding*, *Dramatics*, several books of plays (all co-written with Hazel Edwards). We have also co-written a novel, and a 'how to write for kids'. My latest 'how to write' is also a personal memoir.

### **You have books that have been self published (two adult murder mysteries, and your latest book, *Mentoring Your Memoir* for adults) as well as a number of books published by a variety of commercial publishing houses. Was your first book self published or commercially published?**

My first four (4) YA books were written under the Dolly imprint, and my pseudonym was Gerri Lapin. They had to be carefully structured so they taught me lots about writing for YA. The first book under my own name was *Mavis Road Medley* (Margaret Hamilton Books). This novel won acclaim and was used in schools to illustrate life in Melbourne during the Depression.

My first self published book was my adult culinary mystery *UnJust Desserts*. This was the first of its kind that appeared in Australia, and as a children's author, publishers didn't want to know me, nor did they appreciate that some readers enjoyed 'cosy mysteries'. All I got were rejection slips. Three years later I published the follow up to *Unjust Desserts: UnKind Cut*. I always

thought there was a market for this kind of thriller and since have been proved correct.

### **How did you get started, ie. how did you go about self publishing or gathering information?**

I went into self publishing in a very small way... mostly to test if there was a market out there; thus I kept expenses at a very low level, and also in terms of the numbers published. I mostly sell these books when I do talks. However *Mentoring Your Memoir* has been taken on by the distributors (Dennis Jones) and Peter Pal for libraries. As this is apparently unusual for self published books, it has given me courage to go ahead. Because this is a hybrid (part 'how to write', part 'memoir', part 'examples from my own work') I knew from my previous experience of creating something that hadn't been done before, that I'd have a hard time finding a publisher. I decided this was too much wasted energy and went ahead alone.

### **How did you go about editing your work?**

I contacted lots of editors who were all very expensive. As I had no idea how many copies I would sell, in the end friends and family helped me edit. Of course there is still some tweaking I'd like to do, but that also happens when I'm commercially published.

### **How long did the self publishing process or independent publishing take place, ie. from the beginning to the printing of your books?**

I was put onto a very helpful company *BookPod* who did their very best to help me keep costs down and produce a good looking product. I would recommend them to anyone else who intends self publishing. All in all, the process took less than four months.

### **What obstacles did you encounter during this process, if any?**

My major obstacles were costs. Trying to keep them minimal. Also, given I was writing a memoir, some of my relatives were dead keen against it. Worried about what I might say????

### **What was your print run?**

My first print run is small. I'm waiting to see how the book sells, before I do any more.

### **What are the advantages and disadvantages of self publishing or publishing independently?**

The major disadvantage is that you have to be your own publisher, and know something about the business, plus having enough belief that there is a reading public waiting for your book with open arms. The major disadvantage

is that there is a snobbish belief that if a book is self published, ergo... it can't be very good. Also, if it's a failure the writer has to bear the costs and find enough storage space. That's why I keep my print runs small though, as a result, each book costs me more.

**What was your biggest learning curve or is there anything that you would have done differently?**

I would now be prepared to pay an editor for line- proofing.

**What does successful self publishing or successful independent publishing mean to you?**

That I am often way ahead of the market! I had already proved this with some of my ms for kids where it took me years to find a publisher who saw its potential (eg *Shape-Shifters*, a little book that discusses an unusual way of coping with bullies). Then came my culinary mysteries. When it came to *Mentoring Your Memoir*, because I talk to many clubs, often composed of seniors and genealogy enthusiasts, I knew that many people wanted to collate/write their own or other life histories.

**What advice would you give other authors who are thinking about self publishing/publishing independently or setting up their own company?**

This is hard! I guess, trust your gut instincts. Is there something like it already out there? How original is the idea? And think about how many books you will give away for review and to friends. Many are wasted as newspapers rarely review self published books. I tend to keep costs as low as possible but this may not apply to other writers.

**What attributes do you feel are necessary to be a successful self publisher eg. determination, patience, organization, sales and marketing experience, self belief, ...???**

All of the above and more. In spades.

**Do you get involved in the marketing of your commercially published books? If yes, how do you promote your book? And do the commercial publishers assist you greatly in book promotion?**

All my books - and these include those put out by commercial publishers - have required an enormous input from me in terms of marketing. I'm prepared to give my time, money (yes, I hate to tell you this, but marketing costs are often carried by the author) and energy. I contact state and local newspapers, radio stations, writing magazines, ezines and other people's blogs as I don't have one of my own. I also have cards that carry my book titles.

**Are there any differences in the way you market your self published books in comparison to those commercially published?**

When I give this much thought, probably not. Most publishers are reluctant to spend money on PR and those in charge of PR are often part timers with only enough time to spend maybe a week on my book. It's always up to me to market my books. The major difference between a commercial publisher and self publishing is who carries the up front costs. Also, the public attitude to self publishing can be dishearteningly negative.

**Because you are commercially published, do you feel that the self publishing/independent publishing path has been easier for you? If so, in what way?**

No, not easier because I was entering a world I didn't know enough about. I now have far more respect for designers and anyone else who works for a publisher, and am less inclined to complain... I know what they're up against.

**Even though you are widely published, where would you like to be in five year's time? – ie. writing wise.**

Given I'm no 'spring chicken' I hope to still be writing. I still dream of being a 'twenty-year overnight success.' Never give up hope is my motto.

**As mentioned above, *Mentoring Your Memoir* is your latest self published/independently published book. Do you plan to self publish again in the future. If so, why?**

I honestly don't know, and therefore can't answer this. Let me first see how *Mentoring Your Memoir* works out. However with the coming of the ebook I think many of us will be self publishing, and very cheaply. This is a time of transition, and though many authors, publishers and readers will be dragged screaming into this digital future, I think it is upon us. Therefore, more books will be published and though they may go through a publishing company, many will also be self published. I still have *UnFair Fodder* (the last of my adult murder mysteries) to complete. This is a project I intend to return to some time in the future.

*What projects are you working on now?*

*In Hades.* My very first verse novel. Magic realism roughly based on the Homer's *Odyssey*, this is a love story between a street kid and an anorexic lass who comes from a wealthy family. Coming shortly are: *Gallipoli Medals* (Anzac Society) *Space Footie* and *Other Stories* (companion to *My Horrible Cousins* and other *Stories*). *eSide* (a contemporary fantasy) and *The Youngest Cameleer*. (Historical account of the first non indigenous sighting of Uluru)

## **What words best describe you?**

Depends on who you ask. I see myself as quirky, cranky, extraverted and persistent. I love listening to people's stories and watching crowds. But I have quiet moments too. I was once described by an artist friend as an extravert/introvert, whatever that means.

## **Have you any other words of advice?**

Only one: PERSISTENCE.

## **And Goldie, just to finish off, could you just complete the following:**

***At school I was ...*** a naughty child who used 'dumb insolence' as her weapon. Probably why later I became a teacher - always understood the more difficult kids I taught.

***When I was a child I wanted to be ...*** a scientist. Given math was my weakness I didn't have much chance of fulfilling this dream.

***I relax by ...*** reading, knitting, walking, watching DVDs, going to movies and listening to music.

## **Here is a review:**

Title: ***Mentoring Your Memoir***

Author: Goldie Alexander

BookPOD Bookstore

[www.goldiealexander.com](http://www.goldiealexander.com)

Price: AU\$28 + shipping (price varies with your location)

ISBN: 978-0-9803572-1-9

Review by Alan Wheatley

Goldie is a widely-published author of fiction and non-fiction books, articles and short stories for adults and children.

In *Mentoring Your Memoir* Goldie successfully blends her own memoirs with, as she says, "practical hints for both experienced and novice writers". I found her own story absorbing, which says a great deal about Goldie's skills as a writer, while the many useful tips for writers are set out clearly and with insight. In fact, it takes a brave author to put her own writing up for judgment as well as an exemplar to illustrate the tuition.

Her early life story is set in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and London and the reader is treated to Goldie's observations about the social mores of each place as they were from 1936 to 1967, and by extension, the ups and downs of her own life. She doesn't pull any punches and I consider her memoirs so interestingly written that they deserve a book of their own.

But the main focus of *Mentoring Your Memoir* is on the many practical hints Goldie offers that will show us, she says, "how to document our own life histories ... (and) that will lead you through the creative process from research, structure, crafting, to beginnings, endings, controversial issues and publishing".

A challenging list, and one well-tackled by Goldie.

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Well, I don't know about you but I am already eager to read *Mentoring Your Memoir*.

www.goldiealexander.com  
for reviews of all my books and any more info that may be relevant