

WRITING MY FIRST NOVEL

Stepping towards publication by Suzanne Leal

My first novel, *Border Street*, was published last year. The story begins when a young Australian couple, Kate and Cameron, move next door to their landlords, Frank and Vera, a Czech couple in their seventies. For Cameron, it is all a little too close but Kate is curious. As Kate and Frank get to know each other better, Kate becomes privy to his wartime history. Frank's is the story of the blond-haired, blue-eyed, German-speaking indulged son of a wealthy Czech industrialist who somehow loses his confidence to become, in his later life, an anxious and watchful man.

Border Street is semi-biographical and draws upon my ongoing friendship with my former landlords, Fred and Eva Perger.

In 1993, I moved from the inner city to the beach, rented a house in Tamarama next to Fred and Eva and stayed there for the next six years. Over that time, I developed a very close relationship with Fred and Eva, so much so that I became almost part of the family.

Over the years as his trust in me grew, Fred began to confide in me about his past in Prague. While there has been much written about the Poles and the Germans during the second world war, there has, to my knowledge, been much less written about the Czechs. By luck, I had found myself in a particularly privileged position. Fred trusted me as he would a member of his family. Because I wasn't, in fact, part of his family, however, there was enough distance between us to enable him to be completely open and forthcoming with me.

I started to interview Fred in

2001. Once a week we would meet at a coffee shop and I would record the interviews before going home to transcribe them. Transcribing the interviews gave me an intimate knowledge not only of Fred's life story, but also of his vocabulary, the rhythm of his voice and the lilt of his accent. This helped me enormously when it came to writing dialogue for the fictional character, Frank.

Fred was a spectacular interviewee. His memory is close to photographic and he was, in the interviews, always honest, even to his own detriment. Such honesty is a rare quality.

He was generous with his story, giving me the permission to use it as I felt fit. I gave him a copy of the transcribed interviews, which ran into hundreds of pages, and in return, he gave me the basis for *Border Street*.

Writing *Border Street* as a work of fiction rather than

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non-fiction enabled me to use the material I had while allowing me the creative freedom to develop my own characters.

In 2003, I received a manuscript development award from Varuna Writer's Centre. This involved a week's residency at Varuna with a mentor, the writer and journalist, Margaret Simons, and three other writers. One of the writers, Josiane Behmoiras, subsequently published the memoir, *Dora B*, which was shortlisted for the 2006 Douglas Stewart prize for non-fiction.

During the week at Varuna, Margaret Simons facilitated group and individual sessions to teach us about the writing process and discuss the progress of our manuscripts. The sessions were invaluable. Following her advice to show rather than tell the reader the story, I began to include more dialogue in my manuscript. The story took shape from this point and my writing began to flow.

Margaret Simons also advocated the three-draft manuscript. According to this technique, the first draft serves to discover what the story is about, the second draft formulates the structure of the book and the third draft is the start of the editorial process. Of course, each draft can, in itself, involve several rewrites.

Using this technique has enabled me to start writing new work without becoming too anxious. If the role of the first draft is merely to get an idea of the story rather than to write

the first pages of a masterpiece, it is easier to find the courage to sit down and simply start writing. By the time the first draft is completed on that basis, the focus of the story is clearer and the commencement of the second draft less daunting.

After my week at Varuna, I continued to work on my manuscript until I felt it was ready to send to an agent. In May 2005, I wrote a letter to the London-based agent, Toby Eady, attaching a synopsis of my story together with the first two chapters of the manuscript.



Suzanne Leal

The week after I had written to him, Toby rang to request the full manuscript. After reading the manuscript, he offered to act as my agent. He has proven to be a terrific agent. From a personal perspective, he is a very interesting man. The son of the late author, Mary Wesley, he is married to the Chinese author, Xinran. He has a particular focus on Asian literature, having acted for Jung Chang, who wrote *Wild Swans*, as well as Fan Wu and Zhu Wen. His other authors include Rachel Seiffert and Bernard Cornwell.

Unlike many Australian literary agents, Toby Eady provides editorial support to his authors. Laetitia Rutherford, one of the directors of Toby's agency, Toby Eady Associates, gave me valuable editorial suggestions, enabling a much more polished manuscript to be submitted for publication.

At the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2005, Toby submitted my manuscript to Henry Rosenbloom, who owns the Melbourne publishing house, Scribe. Scribe bought the Australian and New Zealand rights for *Border Street* in December 2005. Aviva Tuffield edited the manuscript

► page 22

HOW TO GET YOUR BOOK PUBLISHED CONT.

> page 20

publisher would employ. Buy the help you need and learn as much as you can about book production. Euan Mitchell's *Self-Publishing Made Simple* is an excellent guide [see page 31 of *Newswrite* for details of how to get it]. And don't print too many. Small runs are economical these days, and anyway, if the book's as good as you think it is and if it sells, a big publisher's going to come along and buy the rights from you — if not for this book, then for your next. It happens.

And what are publishers looking for these days? I'm no expert but I keep my eye on the bookshops. As ever, publishers want books that are very well written in genres and on subjects that publishers think will sell. And what do they think will sell? Non-fiction traditionally outsells fiction, and the ratio is shifting non-fiction's way. Literary fiction in Australia is in decline, but genre fiction (romance,

crime, thriller, chic lit...) is on the rise. Celebrity fiction — the Joan Collins, Danielle Steele kind of thing — has lost its lustre. Conspiracy fiction, if I may coin a phrase, seems to be the thing, if Dan Brown is any guide — and books that blur the line between history or memoir and fiction, and trade on the author's claim to have been somewhere tough (even if they weren't) and suffered much. In non-fiction, celebrity is waning, too, but "Australian Story"-style life books, extraordinary lives of ordinary people, are waxing. Narrative non-fiction — well-crafted real-life stories like *Longitude*, *Gum* and *The Poison Principle*, like *The Surgeon of Crowthorne* and *Stasiland*, military histories like Peter Fitzsimons' *Kokoda* — is, in some ways, the new fiction. Big idea nonfiction, books that engage with contemporary concerns — Tim Flannery on climate change and David Marr on refugees and children overboard are two that come to

mind — is part of the non-fiction boom but, to succeed with such books, it's important to be as authoritative as those two guys. Poetry has fled to the internet and brave small presses. Children's books have recovered from a crisis of confidence brought on by the coming of talking books and video games, and are growing in market share. Health, self-help, dieting, gardens and getting rich, selling things and finding your soul are perennials. And one of the biggest books of the moment is a little book called *Spotless*, on how to remove stains and solve other big-time domestic disasters. Now what does that say about us?

Anyone who watches the news and reads the magazines can work out what preoccupies us; some of that will engage us in book form, too. No one but you, though, can write a book in your voice about what you know or imagine or remember or wonder about. Sit down and

write that book, and make it fine. That's what readers are looking for, and good publishers know it.

MARK TREDINNICK

Mark will be holding several workshops at the Centre in 2007: "Writing History" on Sunday 25 March, 10am-4pm (07WTRED2), and "Nothing but the truth - the craft of writing non-fiction" on Saturday 14 April, 10am-4pm (07WTRED3), repeated on Saturday 4 August, 10am-4pm (07WTRED4).

Mark's new book The Little Red Writing Book (UNSW Press, 2006) is a lively and readable guide to lively and readable writing: it's a manual of technique, style, poetics and manners for everyone who writes and wants to do it better. "A book for every writer's backpack" according to Nicholas Jose. See page 32 of Newswrite for details of how to purchase it.

WRITING MY FIRST NOVEL CONT.

> page 19

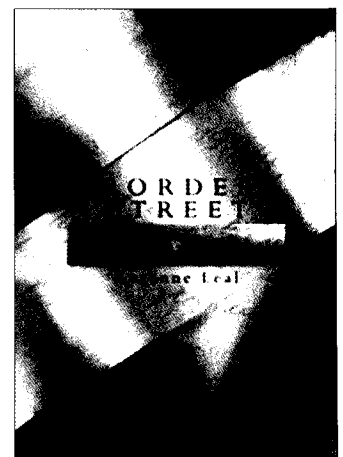
for me. A good editor, I have been told, is invaluable. From the outset, Aviva understood what I was trying to achieve in the book. She tightened the manuscript by suggesting the removal of passages that didn't progress the story, made grammatical corrections and pointed out the over-use of certain words or expressions. Sandy Cull designed the cover for the book. I was impressed with her cover suggestion because although immediately striking,

its significance increases upon a reading of the book.

Border Street was published in August 2006. An audio book of *Border Street* is currently being produced by Louis Braille Audio.

SUZANNE LEAL

Suzanne Leal will be a guest of the NSW Writers' Centre's Contemporary Australian Fiction Festival on Saturday 24 March in a panel session at 10.15am on "Writing the first, second, fifth novel".



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