

northerly

BYRON WRITERS FESTIVAL MAGAZINE WINTER 2026



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Antoinette Lattouf

Sonya Voumard

Romy Ash

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A podcast exploring the unique community of the Northern Rivers

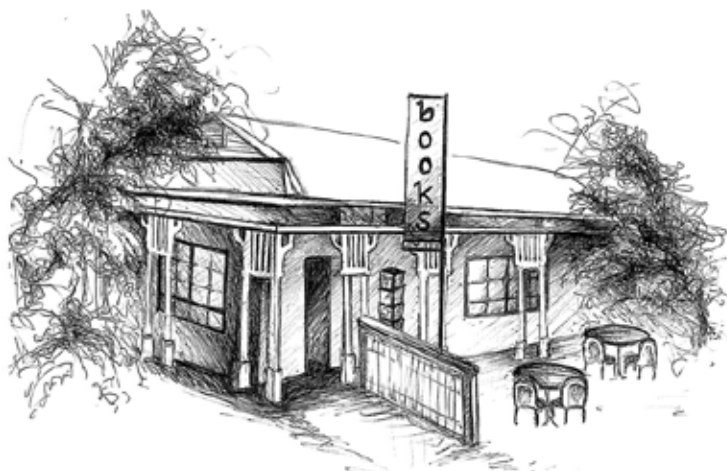
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From the Artistic Director

This year, Byron Writers Festival returns to Byron Bay on the land and waterways of the Bundjalung nation. With a new precinct in the heart of town, the 2026 festival is both reinvention and homecoming – an offer of sanctuary in a tumultuous world.

Over three days, we will gather with many of the finest Australian and international writers whose insight and originality will illuminate the possibilities and purpose of literature. From new ways of understanding the past, present and future, to exploring expectations of form and language, the writers of Byron Writers Festival '26 bring wisdom, joy, irreverence, and indefatigable curiosity to the most easterly point of mainland Australia.

We present this festival at a moment of great global change, in times that are increasingly chaotic, dark and absurd, as algorithmic tools offer a cheap illusion of creativity and understanding. From the festival stage to the bookstore and the cafes, take sanctuary here alongside those nourished by the doing of writing, reading and thinking.

Discover the best in literature from around the country, with international guests from Aotearoa, Chile, India, Singapore, UK and the USA, and engage in uplifting conversations on literary craft, philosophy, politics, climate, love, and family.



In uncertain times, these conversations offer the antidote to despair. In this special festival edition of *northerly*, we welcome you to Byron Writers Festival '26.

Jessica Alice
Artistic Director

northerly  Byron
Writers
Festival

northerly is the magazine of Byron Writers Festival.

Byron Writers Festival is a non-profit organisation presenting workshops and events year-round, including the annual festival.

Held on the lands of the Arakwal Bumberbin peoples of the Bundjalung Nation, we pay respect to the Traditional Owners of these lands and acknowledge them as the original storytellers of this region.

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What We're Reading



news

A Byron sanctuary

As we count down to August, there is a hum of anticipation running through the Byron Writers Festival office that feels different from any year before. Now in our thirtieth year — a milestone that, after the disruption of 2025 — we are determined to meet with celebration.

From Friday 14 to Sunday 16 August, the heart of Byron Bay will transform into a literary precinct: seven iconic venues, including two marquees — one on the foreshore, the other in the centre of town — weaving together markets, live music and ocean bathing with over 110 sessions of storytelling and ideas. Moving into the heart feels like a homecoming: thirty years on from the festival's first gathering as the Northern Rivers Writers Centre. Look how far we've come!

This year's theme, Sanctuary, feels especially apt. In a moment of global upheaval, when algorithmic tools offer only a cheap illusion of creativity. We're inviting our community to take sanctuary in the real thing: the slow, deliberate work of writing, reading and thinking together. Our program reflects that spirit, with Richard Flanagan returning to present *Heresies*, Booker Prize-winner Geetanjali Shree bringing *Tomb of Sand*, and an extraordinary local lineup including Trent Dalton, Antoinette Lattouf, Evelyn Araluen, Melissa Lucashenko and Steve Toltz among them, standing alongside global voices.

Join us in community this August as we celebrate not just 30 years of Byron Writers Festival, but the literary arts, right here in Byron Bay. Thank you for thirty years of continued support — we can't wait to welcome you home in August.





Celebrating thirty years of the festival

Feature events

Byron Writers Festival's 2026 Feature Events, held 14–16 August in Byron Bay, are led by three headline sessions. Antoinette Lattouf, acclaimed journalist and human rights activist, is joined by former publisher and festival director Louise Adler for Women Who Win, an evening celebrating the courage and conviction of women who defied expectations and shattered barriers, on Friday 14 August at Jonson St Stage.

Richard Flanagan – the only author to win both the Booker Prize and the Baillie Gifford Prize – appears at the Byron Theatre on Saturday 15 August, in conversation with ABC Radio National's Sarah Kanowski about his new collection, *Heresies*.

And beloved Australian fiction author Trent Dalton returns to the Festival in conversation with Richard Glover about his latest novel, *Gravity Let Me Go*.

In a special, intimate festival experience, we will host a Literary Lunch with Bob Carr on Saturday 15 August at Bang Bang in Byron Bay. This is a rare opportunity to learn more about his life and career, with an insider's view on the world of politics.

All feature event tickets can be purchased via our website.

Rhoda Roberts Oration

Join us to honour the late, beloved Rhoda Roberts AO with Byron Writers Festival's inaugural Rhoda Roberts Oration.

A proud Wadjabul Wiyabal woman of the Bundjalung nation, Aunty Rhoda was a visionary cultural leader and masterful storyteller, whose wisdom, wit, and generosity in sharing culture was a gift to all.

Together we gather to celebrate her legacy of telling First Nations stories on the global stage, her commitment to truth in media, and her tireless role as a mentor who brought community together.

Hosted by Naomi Moran, the inaugural Rhoda Roberts Oration will be delivered by Wesley Enoch.

Inside Publishing

The 2026 festival offers writers a hands-on look at the publishing world. Inside Publishing is a full-day program with industry leaders – including Lex Hirst, Anna O'Grady, Peri Wilson, and agents Brendan Fredericks and Alex Adsett – covering how book deals happen and how to pitch your work.

Meet the Agent offers 15-minute consultations with Alex Adsett (almost sold out). Novelist Kathryn Heyman leads a **Masterclass in Harnessing Wonder** on crafting vivid characters and scenes. And a **Self Publishing Day**, supported by IngramSpark and Bold Authors, covers the mindset and mechanics of going it alone – including a session with local author Maggie Walters.

Student writing prize

Our student writing awards celebrate young

creative voices of the Northern Rivers with cash prizes and publishing opportunities up for grabs. Congratulations to all our entrants, and we look forward to notifying the winners at the end of July.

This year we have three student writing prizes:

- Southern Cross University Student Writing Prize: Years 9-12 students
- Susie Warrick Young Writers Award: Years 7-8 students
- The Jesse Blackadder Student Writing Prize: Years 4-6 students

Students from anywhere in the Northern Rivers are eligible to enter.

Thank you to our partners

We would like to extend a big thank you to all our funders, partners and donors who are supporting Byron Writers Festival 2026. This includes our Principal Patron: The Vasudhara Fund; Funding Partners: NSW Government (through Create NSW) and Creative Australia; Major Partners: Southern Cross University, Tasmanian Walking Company and The Book Room. We also thank First National Byron for supporting our Kids Program on Festival Sunday. For a full list of 2026 partners and supporters go to:

www.byronwritersfestival.com/partners

Benefactors and patrons

Byron Writers Festival would like to thank our valued patrons and benefactors for their incredible generosity and support. Annual gifts from our patrons are one of the most significant ways to support Byron Writers Festival, unlocking new potential for our regional arts organisation, and supporting the growth of the literary arts in our region. If you would like to join us as a patron, or hear more about being part of this community of change-makers, please contact our Development Manager, Aarna Hudson at:

partnerships@byronwritersfestival.com



Cover story

The cover image for this issue of *northerly* shows a *Roridomyces austrororidus* photographed by Stephen Axford, captured as part of his and filmmaker Catherine Marciniak's decade-long journey documenting the hidden kingdom of fungi.

Join Stephen Axford and Catherine Marciniak — the husband-and-wife team behind *Planet Fungi* — at Byron Writers Festival this August 14-16, as they reveal the magical world of fungi and the story of their discovery of a new species, in conversation with Kris Kneen.

For over a decade, Axford and Marciniak have been documenting fungi in photographs and videos across Australia, Asia and the world — their new feature documentary, *Follow the Rain*, is now streaming on Netflix in Australia and New Zealand, and their coffee table book, *Planet Fungi: A Photographer's Foray*, is available now.

Feature poet: Ender Başkan

A Workers Paradise

i go to work / i go to work / i go to work / i go to work / i go to work
/ dilân says – i love you dad / dilân says – but i love mum more / i
go to work / four days in a row / 5,6,7,8 / im tired / when i go home
i also go to work but i dont say that / centrelink says sophie doesnt
work / its a lot of work being a parent, people say / it must be a lot
of work / how do you do it? they say, i cant imagine / but i go to
work and i work / i come home and i work and i work / on fridays i
dont go to work but when my dad asks i say – im at work – because i
am, im writing, im working / sometimes i ride to work / sometimes
i ride to work with dilân on the back and drop her at childcare /
sometimes i run beside her as she rides / i walk to work / i drive to
work / i catch the tram to work / i get dropped off at work / im yet
to work from home, my industry doesnt allow it / sometimes i say
to people that i go to work to rest, work begins when i get home /
i say things like – i better go to work – im running late for work – i
cant be bothered going to work today – sorry ive gotta go to work
– i just knocked off work / my payslip says i worked 30 hours this
week / some people work 60 hours a week but im not impressed /
sophie works 168 hours a week / my grandma, who they say never
worked, said to me – work ender work a lot work hard you must
work / my grandma worked at home and from home / i call my
grandpa from work on a sunday and tell him im on lunch break and
he is impressed – oooow he says very good / my grandpa worked
until he did his back / my mum went back to work when i was 1 /
my mum still works / the working class works / the middle class
middles / i go to work / the dishwasher works / this pen works / the
cars getting fixed / this deodorant really works / does the ant work?

/ does the mushroom get time in lieu? / does this swimming pool
ever relax? / this worker, it is said, works for the boss / works for
the man / the nuclear family doesnt work / the father works / the
mother labours / the child plays / the child gets schooled / the child
is prepared for work / a guy i worked with said he needed 2 million
bucks to retire / a work death balance / some people say they love
their work / some people hate their life / i go to work / this must be
a great place to work they say to me at work / we came to australia
as workers / to work / australia is good for work, turkey is good to
live, people say / australia might be a workers paradise / maybe
this is a wonderland where each human received the basics of life,
food shelter healthcare culture community / when i lived in turkey
my music teacher said that hed only once been to another country,
bulgaria when it was communist – how was it? i asked – fantastic
he said people were out on the streets and in the bars drinking
talking and singing every night

Airport

my grandparents or uncles and aunties and cousins are returning home from returning home / the rest of the family early morning pilgrims to the airport / waiting for the silver doors to slide open / arrivals board spasming / DELAYED / LANDED / we all live close to the airport / international arrivals hall now / its 615am in the 1990s 2000s / perhaps all these memories have become one / poem / my mums parents have returned home / they say australia is home now / they say this might be their last time back / they like their home here their backyard here / my dede has arrived with new teeth / i am bamboozled / he is a handsome man / he has a new suit too and a tan / my anneanne has a new beret and gold / shes beautiful / my cousins and i have been waiting / playing with trolleys / we will get to school late this morning / we might get hash browns from maccas / an indenture is a legal contract that reflects an agreement between two parties / usually labour servitude / they say you only belong to a country when you bury a loved one in it / we kiss our grandparents quickly / one on each cheek / we try unzipping their luggage for gifts / who got what / i get a rip-off galatasaray top tho my team is fenerbahçe and also a silver chain / we dont make the pilgrimage anymore / but i offer pick-ups and drop-offs all the time / its good to see a friendly face on the other end / back then the aura of travellers / some gold dust that rubbed off onto you / probably more for me / id never been to turkey but i was turkish / our backyard was under a flightpath / look up and imagine / my cousin forgot how to speak english after six months there / my cousins with grandparents there / i had great-grandparents there i never met / my parents didnt take me back / my parents couldnt look

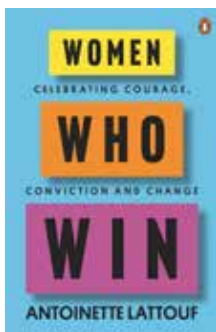
back / my mum said too painful / my dad said you gotta move on /
when home alone mum listened to turkish music / australia told us
no dont go back / work / a debt / australia a spell / australia using
up the best of us / my mum with a pocket koran in her bag / we were
always close to the airport / zeki dede worked at istanbul airport /
ali dede worked at ankara airport / thats how they got here / zeki
dede worked at essendon airport / my dad worked at tullamarine
airport / i did my work experience at the airport / mum took me to
roger david and we bought two shirts a tie and pants / wed buy kfc
and drive out to the airport to watch the planes land with dad / or
take off / an airport a black hole that sucks in all around it / they say
direct flights will soon start from melbourne to istanbul / just go to
sleep and youre there / youre home / in istanbul they lived near the
airport / my dedes dad was buried on its edge / one day they said
– were expanding the airport so come dig up your kin / so my dede
went and dug up his dad / exhumed his remains / and put him in
a new cemetery / almost sixty years later / my dede dies / is buried
at fawkner cemetery under a flight path / he dies while i am living
in istanbul / i go to the cemetery and find his mum and dad and
sit with them / merhaba i say aloud ben senin büyük torununum
/ öğlun zeki benim dedemdir / çok uzaklarda / topraklara verildi /
başımız sağ olsun / allah rahmet eylesin

13

Ender Başkan is a Melbourne-based poet, novelist, small-press publisher and bookseller. The winner of the 2021 Overland Judith Wright Poetry Prize, his poems have been published in *HEAT*, *Meanjin*, *Cordite*, *Unusual Work*, *Rabbit*, *Loom* and *Best of Australian Poems*, amongst others. He has also published a novel, *A Portrait of Alice as a Young Man* and is the co-founder of Vre Books press, Agog poetry readings and Study experimental space. His debut poetry collection *Two Hundred Million Musketeers*, published by Giramondo, was shortlisted for the 2026 Victoria Premiers Literary Awards.



Courage, cultural barriers, and women who win



Antoinette Lattouf's *Women Who Win* explores the women who defied barriers and broke new ground in the realms of politics, sport, science and more – against the backdrop of her own extraordinary recent experiences. Ahead of her appearance at Byron Writers Festival 2026, she chats about the book and her very public fight against forces hoping she would “shut up”.

Having one's name become a verb is daunting. Following a landmark court ruling against the national broadcaster, to be 'Lattoufed' now means being dismissed or silenced for defending human rights.

Award-winning journalist Antoinette Lattouf's case against the ABC became central to debates on free speech, employee rights, institutional accountability, and the consequences of challenging media power.

Her second book, *Women Who Win*, profiles Australian women who defied expectations and overcame cultural and legal barriers. Featured figures include Australia's first female law graduate, First Nations leaders, pioneers in sport and science, and the women behind the first sex discrimination class action. Lattouf's own experiences are woven throughout.

“I began researching women who took on what seemed to be impossible odds and won, and it was when I was at my lowest, feeling the most alone and vulnerable,”

Lattouf said.

“That's really why and how I started the book, because knowledge has been a tool of comfort for me.”

Lattouf began writing before the judgment was delivered, aiming to document her experience with honesty and candour.

“I knew how significant it was, but I was terrified. I had insomnia, panic attacks and because of the level of vitriol and the number of threats, I was constantly vigilant in public, but part of the reason I kept going was because of the strength and stories of the women I connected with and learned about.

“I sadly came to make peace with the fact that things that have been necessary throughout Australia's history have often been cruel and unfair to women, even if they've come out triumphant.

“Understanding the impacts and the legacies of strong women before us is why I wanted to honour these women.”

As a mother of two daughters, Lattouf worked to remain stoic and protect them from the media attention and public threats. However, upon learning that the verdict would be live-streamed, her composure was rattled.

"I hadn't prepared for that. My expectation was that it was going to be uploaded as a PDF online on the Federal Court website," she said.

"When I found out about the live stream, it was just way too much. That night, I was sitting on the couch in the dark after putting my kids to sleep. My partner was away working, and I just started to cry. I was so sad and very frightened.

"My older daughter came downstairs and asked what was wrong. I was honest and said, 'Mummy's really scared and very tired.' Our roles reversed, and she gave me this big hug and said, 'Mum, you did the right thing, you only told the truth.'

"Having my 13-year-old daughter perfectly execute feminist and human rights talking points, I felt immense pride, but also the sadness that her world isn't as innocent as I would have liked it to be."

Lattouf and the father of her children are both of Lebanese descent. She believes that, at this time, Lebanese lives are undervalued by political leaders and the media.

"At a time when Palestinians are being ethnically cleansed, it was as much about protecting children as it was being proud of my lineage," she said.

"My mother was a refugee from Lebanon during the Civil War, and she experienced atrocities to the level I didn't even know. When she started seeing the images in Gaza, she started to share. It was the first time in my life that she had shared what she endured, how she went through rubble and pulled out bodies, and sometimes there were limbs not attached to anybody, and how she carried shrunk and injured children to medical care, and how she slept on the floor of evacuated schools, hungry.

"So much of what we were witnessing at the time being inflicted on Palestinians, my mother had experienced, and I never knew.

Here she was telling me on the other side of the world, decades later, fighting for the right to voice a political opinion concerned by human rights atrocities."

Lattouf said her health is improving and that prioritising her mental well-being remains an ongoing process. She also emphasised that her journalistic principles have not changed since the case.

"I talk about the point at which I decided to back myself as a woman (we're often underestimated), sticking to my values in public interest journalism, my commitment to human rights, and my pride in my heritage as an Arab Australian. None of those things has changed one iota," she said.

"There were so many forces that wanted me to shut the hell up and go away. I was constantly attacked by the Murdoch press; I'm still attacked by and surveilled by the pro-Israel lobbyists, and then the ABC, the largest broadcaster in the country. All were hoping I would shut up, and I did no such thing.

"All of the things I believed and was doing before I got sacked, I'm still doing now. I've not changed, which is what I'm probably the most proud of."

Women Who Win is published by Penguin.



Beneath the water line – festival musings

Local developmental editor Laurel Cohn reflects on the unique role writers festivals play in the life of readers, and picks out a couple of special moments from past Byron Writers Festivals.

At Byron Writers' Festival in 2019, Jennifer Clement noted that a book is an iceberg; the reader sees the tip. What a writer offers us when they speak publicly – at writers festivals or conferences, in interviews, podcasts, or at book launches – is a glimpse of what lies beneath the water line. The story behind the story, the person behind the words, and the efforts to navigate the public and private landscapes in which their work exists.

Over the years of attending festivals in Australia and overseas, I have collected a large dossier of notes – pearls of wisdom, insight, humour and humanity that inspire me or help me understand how stories work and how writers work their stories.

I have learned a lot about the industry – the different pathways for different writers and different types of books, the highs and lows of getting that debut work published, what it means to be a career writer, the challenges facing creators today.

I have learned a lot about the creative endeavour of writing a book, and the common threads across time and space of how writers try and make sense of themselves and the world through the act of writing. And I have been inspired by the passion and inquisitiveness others have for an astonishing array of topics and ideas.



Writers festivals can serve us in different ways. Listening to a writer talk about a book I have already read can amplify my experience of it, adding a layer of insight, sometimes in surprising ways. Listening to a writer I've heard of but never read, can provide an entree into their work. Listening to a writer I've never heard of before can prompt me to read something I might not have naturally gravitated towards. I always come away with a long reading list and a heavy bag of books!



And then there are those magical sessions, where something transformative happens between the writers on the stage and everyone leaves the space changed in a profound way. This was the case late one afternoon at the Byron Writers Festival in 2024. It was cold and wet with the ground muddy beneath our feet. The smallish audience was hunkered down in puffer jackets and shawls. Caoilinn Hughes was in conversation with Nam Le.

I had been an admirer of Nam Le's work since the publication of his short story collection *The Boat* in 2008. Sixteen years later, he had released his second book, a book of poetry, *36 Ways of Writing a Vietnamese Poem*. I'd never heard of Caoilinn Hughes, an Irish writer with four published novels. She was at the festival talking about her latest book *The Alternatives*.

Unbeknownst to Le, or the audience, Hughes had been a long-time admirer of Le's work and had a strong interest in poetry. Her comments and questions about Le's poems showed an unusual level of analysis, consideration and insight that at one point left Nam Le speechless, he was so moved and honoured by her reading of his poems. No interviewer, he said, had ever showed such deep and perceptive engagement with his work. He took a moment. Then together Le and Hughes explored the landscape of

imagination, meaning and poetry.

After sustained applause, the audience lingered, not quite wanting to step away from the glow. With knowing nods and broad smiles, we all knew we'd been part of something that was very special and immensely beautiful.

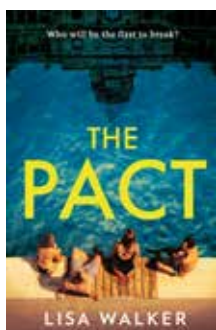
It is this shared experience that makes a festival so powerful; being in community – a community of readers and writers and thinkers, both on and off the stage, who are interested in the creative endeavour. A community open to wonder and curiosity. A community that values the friction required to wrestle with an idea and share the outcome. A community open to the magical moments.

My notebook is at the ready.

Laurel Cohn is a developmental editor passionate about communication and the power of words to engage, inspire and challenge. Since the late 1980s Laurel has been helping writers of all types prepare their work for publication and navigate the challenging terrain of developing a manuscript over multiple drafts. As someone who works with writers, not just their writing, she appreciates the opportunity writers festivals provide for readers to meet the person behind the words. www.laurelcohn.com.au

Warped by tradition:

An interview with Lisa Walker



The Pact is local author Lisa Walker's eighth book, a departure from her track record of acclaimed romantic comedy to explore the dark side of academia with a taught, suspenseful thriller. Here, she discusses the book's genesis and more – accompanied by an extract from the novel ahead of her appearance at Byron Writers Festival 2026.

How did the idea for *The Pact* first germinate in your mind? What were you responding to and what appealed to you about the premise?

When I walked the Camino in 2016, I wasn't looking for a story, but it felt like leaping into a cauldron of ideas, I knew I had to write about it. Back home, I quit my job and started a creative writing PhD. At the time, romantic comedy was my genre – it was all I'd published, and my favourite comfort reading. So, I completed the PhD with a sweet rom-com about an older man on the Camino.

But, plot twist! It was now 2020. As life became more uncertain, and darker, my reading tastes lurched in a new direction. I began devouring psychological thrillers, dark tales with morally grey characters. My older son lives in London, which, from locked-down Australia, felt like Mars. Writing a new English setting into my novel became

a way to feel close. I imagined crumbling castles, old universities warped by tradition. They didn't belong in my rom-com, and the story felt too jaunty to me now, too 2019. So, I scrapped it and started over. I wrote the kind of story I now wanted to read – a gothic mystery about dark academia and literary obsession. My first psychological thriller.

Were there any particular writers or books that served as influence or inspiration on *The Pact*?

The Secret History by Donna Tartt kicked off the dark academia genre and was a big inspiration. I found the ambience of Tartt's Hampden College and the academic pretentiousness of the students incredibly alluring.

A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino by John Brierley was another influence. A pilgrim pressed it on me on the trail, and it helped

me to visualise the Camino as the gothic and spiritual landscape I depict in *The Pact*.

Did the writing of this book see you make any changes to your usual writing practice, in terms of routines, methods or style? If so, how?

The Pact is the hardest book I've written. I had four other books published over the time it took me to write it. I knew there was a good story in there somewhere though!

Writing a psychological thriller required a new skill set. I enjoyed learning about unreliable narrators, cliffhanger chapter endings, and using red herrings to develop suspense. My other novels have been more comedic. I didn't totally move away from that in *The Pact*, but I learnt that humour can undercut suspense and needs to be used carefully in this genre.

***The Pact* has been out for a few months now. What is your relationship with reviews, do you seek them out, or try to remain oblivious to them?**

This is my eighth book, so I've had plenty of time to think about this. It's hard to be oblivious to reviews, but I've realised I need to manage my approach to them carefully. Writing is a confidence game. It takes so long to write a novel, I have to believe I'm doing something worthwhile, or I lose motivation. The author Sophie Hannah says to write as if you know your novel will be a huge success, and I try to cultivate that mindset. Reading online reviews can be demotivating, so I avoid them. Once a book is published, it's out of my control, and I focus on writing the next one. That said, I'm always delighted to have a good review sent my way!

Can you give an overview of your relationship with your publisher? Was the editorial process for *The Pact* a smooth one?

The Pact has been a new experience for me, as my publisher is HQ (HarperCollins) UK, and I've previously only worked with Australian publishers. The publication process was incredibly smooth. Although



The Pact is also published in Australia and the US (with a German translation coming), the UK editor has been my principal point of contact. I love the editorial process. After so much time working on a story alone, it feels affirming to collaborate in bringing it to the next level, and *The Pact* was no exception.

Can you guide us through your involvement with Byron Writers Festival this year: what are your events/panels and what are you particularly looking forward to?

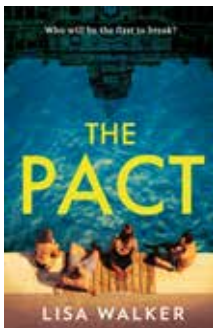
I'm very excited to be on a crime writing panel with the wonderful Louise Milligan and Mark Smith, chaired by Matt Condon, so look out for that one. I'm looking forward to the festival being held in the Byron Bay township. I think venues like the Surf Club and Beach Hotel will showcase the beauty of the bay, and I always enjoy wandering around the town. I haven't seen the full program yet, but I really enjoyed Siang Lu's *Ghost Cities*, so I'm keen to see him. Melissa Lucashenko is always thought-provoking and entertaining too.

What are you working at the moment, or what might your next project be?

I'm deeply ensconced in the edits for my next psychological thriller, *The Last Hike*, which comes out in January 2027. It's about a group of adventure leadership students on an arctic ski tour. I spent a week skiing the Kings Trail in Arctic Sweden in 2024 and returned to do it again this year as further research for this book. It was such a wonderful and intense experience I had to write about it.

Chapter One:

Revenge Plot



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I spot my first pilgrim as I step from the train in Bayonne.

‘Are you doing the Camino?’ The small, rounded woman approaches, the price tag still dangling off her backpack, a camera bouncing against her chest. She beams a one-hundred-watt smile. Her accent is distinctly American. Unlike the other pilgrims on the platform, she wears a full face of makeup, including a slash of crimson lipstick.

‘Yes, that’s right.’ The cacophony of background chatter batters my ears. I can’t believe I’ve joined a group activity; it’s not my thing at all. Will I become known on the trail as the lovely English girl? Or, more likely, as the not-so-lovely one.

‘That’s the platform for the train to Saint Jean Pied de Port, where the walk begins.’ The woman points, and I grudgingly fall into step beside her.

The journey here was a marathon – a train from London to Paris, then another train south. I’m tired and bedraggled with layers

of grime clinging to me, but here I am. As Lula used to say, a writer with ambitions will sacrifice anything for art.

A ticket stub dances over the platform in the breeze as announcements blare in crackling French. Pilgrims stand out amidst the crowd. Backpacks. Walking boots. Muscular calves. Like me, most have walking poles strapped to their packs. The scent of sweat and determination hangs in the air.

A tall man with scraggly blond hair walks past and my breath catches. *No, it’s not him.* Of course it’s not. This pilgrimage was a last-minute decision and I’m one day late. He would have been here yesterday. If at all. I gnaw my lip. What if I’ve come all this way for nothing?

‘Looking for someone?’ asks the woman.

‘Yes. An old ... friend.’ I hadn’t realised there’d be so many pilgrims; he could be hard to track down.

‘Oh, you have a walking companion?’

My pulse twitches. ‘Yes.’ But he doesn’t know it yet.

'That's lovely. I'm on my own, but I'm sure I'll make lots of friends on the way. There are no strangers here, just friends we haven't met yet, right?' She beams.

I murmur noncommittally. I'm not into instant friendship.

'I'm Ree.'

I can hardly refuse to reply. 'I'm Tess.'

'I have to do a tinkle, so bye for now,' says Ree.

A tinkle?

Wiggling her scarlet-painted nails, the woman heads for the restroom, and I board the train. Hopefully I won't run into her again. Dropping into a seat, I pull out my phone, put on my glasses and refresh my messages, but there's nothing new. I let out a breath, trying to ease the jitters. The message will come, it has to.

My eyes fall on the invitation, which is still there in my emails. I read it again.

To: All Ravensthorpe Alumni

Subject: Remembering Lula

Ravensthorpians!

Three years have passed since our dear Lula's departure. In her memory, I extend to you an invitation for a commemorative pilgrimage. The Camino de Santiago de Compostela held great significance to Lula. Thus, it appears only fitting to honour her in such a manner.

May I also convey to you the creative possibilities of such a journey. As Lula would say, we must feed our writerly souls at every opportunity. How better to unleash inspiration than to walk with others who understand the commitment and dedication required in this path we have chosen?

In keeping with the pilgrim way, no RSVPs shall be taken. Instead, let those who wish to pay tribute to Lula's spirit convene at Saint Jean railway station at the hour of ten in the morn on the sixth of April.

*Salutations,
Iris.*

Iris, one of the Ravensthorpe tutors, has a flamboyant signature style. *To all Ravensthorpe alumni.* Am I even an alumna? I was there for less than a year.

As the train lurches forward, my eyes drop to the backpack at my feet, catching on the rectangular shape of my e-reader. Lula's Camino memoir calls to me in a ghostly whisper. *I'll be with you every step of the way, pilgrim.* A sour taste fills my mouth.

Dusk falls as I arrive in Saint Jean and my reflection glows in the window – glasses glinting and hair writhing in Medusa-like coils. I pat it down as I step off the train, pulling on my puffer jacket to ward off the chill. It's cold for April. My nose twitches at the unfamiliar scent of mountain air. It's been a long time since I've left London.

A nearby pilgrim consults his guidebook. 'Up this way,' he directs his companion.

As they walk away, I eye the scallop shells dangling from their backpacks.

Lula's voice echoes in my head. *In the old days, pilgrims collected a scallop shell from the sea to show they'd completed the pilgrimage.*

My skin prickles. It's as if she's beside me on the platform, her breath warm on my ear.

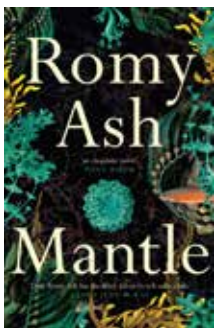
I haven't booked accommodation, and I've got no idea what to expect but, hoisting my backpack, I follow the gang through narrow, cobbled streets and up a hill. Pink-stoned shops nestle beside whitewashed, terraced houses and window boxes burst with vibrant spring flowers. I'm not here for European charm though. It's time to restart my stalled life. To fulfill my pledge to Mum.

Church bells echo through the streets as, panting, I come to a halt outside a door with a sandwich board – *one bed left*. Fate has selected my lodgings.

Excerpt from *The Pact* by Lisa Walker (Harper Collins), out now via all good bookstores and online. Lisa will appear at Byron Writers Festival 2026.

Extract:

Mantle by Romy Ash



Australian novelist Romy Ash's second novel *Mantle* comes thirteen years after her acclaimed debut *Floundering*, and is a soulful exploration of family, fate and science. Here we present the book's opening ahead of Ash's appearance at Byron Writers Festival 2026.

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THE VIEW. IT takes my breath. It is always a shock, on arrival. The house on the clifftop. The three islands jutting out into the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, one after the other. Beyond the islands, the great nothing, unfathomable depths. Today the ocean and the sky are a similar bruise-blue, so that there is no sharp line between them and instead it is as if the ocean rises into the sky. The wind, coming from the south. As if it wants to push me back up the hill. Go home. My stupid wheeled bag bumping against my leg as I walk down the steep path. Too many rocks, fallen bark and sticks, roots, catching in the wheels, to roll the bag. The bark falls from the trees in great swathes. I could curl my body into one of the strips. The inside of the bark, where it holds on to the tree, is a deep fleshy orange colour, and the outside a flat grey. Weathered. Today the wind is so strong that the ribbons of bark are blowing horizontal from the trunks. Still holding on, for now.

I walk onto the deck. Take my shoes off at the front door. I'm standing on the cold timber in my socks. I knock. Nobody comes. I try the door. It's unlocked. I let myself in.

As I step inside, that's when I hear it. The sound of the breathing apparatus.

'Mum? Are you okay?'

'It's not the ciggies,' Mum calls out. 'It's something else. It's something growing in the lungs.'

'Like cancer?' I say, rolling my eyes as I close the door behind me. 'From the ciggies.'

She always speaks like this. Like we are in the middle of something, and there've been no days, no years, in between.

She used to hide cigarettes in the car, but there is no hiding the smell. No mask for that. Fisherman's Friend doesn't cut it. It's always there, hanging about her, a grey perfume.

'It's not,' she says. 'You ask the nurse. There's been a lot of smoke, bushfire smoke. Even the fagus burnt.'

'I don't know what fagus is,' I say.

'I read an article about a woman who thought she had lung cancer. The scans picked up a tumour, but when the doctors went in, what she had was a tree.'



'Mum.'

'She inhaled a fir pine seed. It sprouted. She was coughing blood.'

It takes her a long time to say all this. She has to take a great gasping breath between each word. Mum's face is white. She is not a colour a person should be. She looks much worse than I thought she would. I nearly didn't come. I watch her eyes as she speaks about the dark seat of a lung where a tree had sprouted. She says, 'It was looking for the light. I saw a picture. The sapling was pale, translucent, like a deep-sea creature; or a root.'

'You've got cancer,' I say.

'Roll me a joint, I want to hold it in my hand.'

'Do you want the vape? Are you allowed the vape?'

I never call my mother. I have no idea what she is allowed. Sometimes she calls me and leaves a long voicemail: *Ursula, it's your mother Delores, it is three fifteen on Saturday afternoon* and so on, like it's 1992 and this level of detail is necessary.

'I want to hold it in my hand,' she repeats.

'I can't roll them like you do.'

'A trumpet,' she says, her face cracking open. 'I want to imagine I'm going to smoke the whole glorious thing.'

The smile sends wrinkles everywhere. She is not that old, but the cancer, whatever she thinks she's got, it's sucked the moisture out

of her. She's a skin bag of bones.

'How was your flight?' she asks, an afterthought, like she's just remembered that most conversations begin with small talk.

'Uneventful,' I say.

'The taxi?'

'The driver looked offended when I didn't sit in the front.'

She laughs. 'That'd be right,' she says. 'Top of the pantry.' And when I looked confused: 'The weed.'

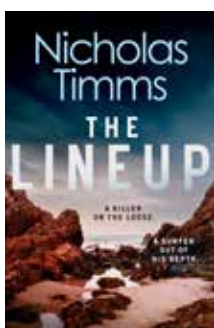
I find the little bowl and the accoutrements on a shelf beside the jars of oats, legumes, pepitas. The weed is also old and dry. I roll the trumpet as best I can, the off-centre cross of it. I notice my hands are shaking. My body is starting to freak out. My head hasn't yet caught up. The long lick, that familiar aniseed taste of the papers. I imagine, looking at my mother gasping for breath, that it will be me who smokes this joint. I haven't smoked weed since I was a teenager. I'm fifty; maybe this will be my new weed era.

I place it by her bed, because by this time she is asleep. Her bed is in the lounge room. I can always see her. This is the way it should be, I guess. It is a hospital bed. All exposed metal ribs. They have installed it by the west window. She can watch the sun go down. A view for the end of things.

Mantle by Romy Ash is published by Ultimo Press.

Sinister underbelly:

An interview with Nicholas Timms



Nicholas Timms turned to Byron's surf culture for his debut novel *The Lineup*, a crime thriller that is high on suspense and action. Ahead of his appearance at Byron Writers Festival 2026, he discusses the book's writing and his path to publication.

How did the idea for *The Lineup* first germinate in your mind? What's the background to the premise?

I'm a lifelong surfer, so surfing is always kind of on my mind. Sometimes to fall asleep I'll think of myself cruising along a perfect wave at The Pass. As it's such a big part of my life, whether I'm actually about to go surfing or not I'll often bring up the live cams for some of my favourite beaches, just to see what the waves are like and surf them vicariously. It was in one of these viewings that I imagined how scary it would be to see something go wrong through the webcam. To see something horrific but be too far away to stop it. At first I imagined some sort of science fiction monster attack – a leviathan emerging from the depths and attacking the lineup. I thought that might be a cool idea for a story. But then I thought of something more grounded. What if what you saw was a murder? And that got my brain firing off in all sorts of directions, about what could cause a surfer to murder another, and what kind of person would be watching the cams so much that they would see it?

From there the idea kind of poured out of

me – essentially a surfing version of *Rear Window*. And soon after, the washed-up surfer turned murder investigator Bo Curren was born.

Can you give us an overview of your writing life and experience prior to this novel?

Just like surfing, I've been writing since I was a kid. I fell in love with stories after ravenously reading *Goosebumps* during recess at Byron Bay Primary. My sister and I would do a creative writing club at home where we'd bring each other stories we wrote and read them out to each other. I always knew it was what I wanted to do, so pretty much every decision I made was geared towards creating some sort of career for myself as a writer, in whatever capacity I could. At Byron Bay High I did Extension 2 English (I wrote some sort of short story about an ancient monster in the forest – it didn't do that well) and drama where I wrote my own monologue (a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde scene – it did moderately better). Then I went to UNSW to study journalism and communications, with a minor in creative writing. Through

that degree I became enamoured with the profession of copywriting, and moved into creative roles for PR and ad agencies where I would write scripts for clients like Arnott's Biscuits and AAMI Insurance. In the background I was doing creative writing projects for my own enjoyment, one of which was *The Lineup*.

Which authors or books stand as significant inspirations or influences on the writing of *The Lineup*?

It's hard to deny the influence of Stephen King on my writing. I read so much of him in my formative years that it's permanently influenced my craft. The way he builds tension in scenes and creates these really sinister characters. It's usually his non-supernatural books like *Misery* that are the scariest.

Margaret Hickey was a big inspiration while writing *The Lineup*. Her book *Broken Bay* was not just great inspiration for an Aussie seaside town crime, but also building in really scary and climactic scenes. I found myself asking, what's my equivalent to her awesome scene where the protagonist is left stranded in the underground cave network?

AJ Finn's *The Woman in the Window* was of course a big influence too – obviously we're playing with the same sort of *Rear Window* trope in different ways, but his style of short, sharp chapters, always with a cliffhanger that gives you reason to keep reading, is something that I think is a great driver of propulsion in a narrative.

How important was it for you to capture a sense of the Byron community and culture in the novel?

I really wanted this novel to be set in Byron from the start. It's such a unique setting, particularly for a crime story. I love this juxtaposition of the sunny, friendly exterior with a slightly sinister underbelly. With *The Lineup*, I wanted to capture the very distinct style of humour and communication present in the surfing community when I was part of it in high school. The camaraderie, but also the aggression that could often be quite scary. I was threatened with violence in the lineup at The Pass when I was fourteen after an older guy dropped in on me, so I was

keen to show that surfing isn't always the happy-go-lucky sport it's seen as.

What were some of the biggest challenges in writing the novel, in terms of plotting, structure, tone and so on?

Despite a lifelong love of the genre, this was my first attempt at a crime novel. With that came a whole set of challenges as I got used to writing the style. I found myself at first trying to make the suspects too funny and friendly, but then realising that these characters need to be people you might actually think are responsible for a murder. So having that edge of tension and suspense, no matter who the character was, was something I had to keep reminding myself of.

I also found myself overcomplicating things – there were a couple of subplots I had in early drafts that were secondary to the murder, but these ended up clouding the story. I learned to make a murder mystery as single-minded as possible – the murder is the core, and everything needs to ladder up to that.

A big one was also just making sure not every scene is a straightforward suspect interview. This gets a bit dry after a while, which I decided to mix up with big set pieces like the surf comp and the big wave surfing scene.

This is your first novel. What was surprised you the most about the editorial process, the publishing process and promotion?

I was surprised to see just how much great editorial guidance can lift a story to the next level. I loved *The Lineup* when I first submitted it, but after structural edits, with some very thoughtful challenges from my publisher, the denouement in particular became much more explosive and surprising.

What are you working on at the moment? What is your next project?

I'm actually working on a sequel to *The Lineup*! Bo and Jess are back, in a new surf town, with a new mystery to solve. I can't say too much yet, but I've upped the stakes and the action, and it's going to be a belter.

The Lineup is published by Penguin.

The saddle of the story:

An interview with Sonya Voumard



Sonya Voumard's memoir *Tremor* is an emotive, witty and inspiring account of life with the neurological movement disorder dystonia, weaving personal experience with compelling social awareness. Voumard, a former political journalist, will appear at Byron Writers Festival 2026.

Can you tell us about how and when *Tremor* emerged in your mind? Had this been a book you'd been working on a long time, or was there a particular timeliness to when you wrote it?

I think the story of *Tremor* has been inside my head for most of my life, figuratively and literally, in the form of a movement disorder for which I didn't have a name or diagnosis until about six years ago. Finding out what had been causing these weird tremors and other symptoms, such as anxiety, faulty brain messages, and severe headaches, since I was very young, was a massive news story for me personally. As a journalist, I had to write about it. I began to see my whole life through this new lens and to understand aspects of my behaviour and reactions more clearly. I've always been a bit of a rebel, got into trouble at school, resisted authority, took risks and flouted convention. These qualities, if you can call them that,

have both helped and hindered me in my career and life. While things haven't always been easy, I'm glad to say that they have never been boring.

Were there any significant literary influences on the book? Which books and writers provided particular inspiration?

Helen Garner and the two late US-based writers Janet Malcolm and Joan Didion are three writers who have inspired my work, including *Tremor*, in different ways. Garner, among other reasons, because she is a brilliant miniaturist and acute observer who has made such an artform of writing reality, particularly Australian reality and place; Malcolm for her sharp dissection of characters and their motives; and Didion for the eloquence with which she captures atmospheres and plausible, abstract imaginings. While writing *Tremor*, I was reading *Surviving Autocracy* by the

Russian-born US-based journalist Masha Gessen, another writer I deeply admire. That book definitely captured the sense of global disorder that seemed to externalise the sense of disorder within my body.

What were the biggest challenges in the writing process, in terms of tone, structure, voice and so on?

Tone is so important when you are writing memoir. The challenge is to achieve a balance between being confessional, so you invite the reader in on an intimate story but do so in a way that avoids self-indulgence. Through my experiences as a journalist, I think I bring a hard-boiled element to my writing the effect of which I hope is to eschew sentimentality. That and humour are key tools for me. And I hope/trust they are effective at playing off against the more sad or tender or emotional parts of the work. Structure is one of the hardest challenges when writing long-form works. This is where great editors come in and I've worked with a few for whom I have great respect and gratitude.

I've done creative writing courses where they have a formula in which you develop your characters and their motivations/problems first and then build out sentences, paragraphs and scenes with complications and payoffs. I can't and don't write like that, which usually means the hard structural work comes at the end. But I do think the work is more spontaneous as a result. Certainly not formulaic. Voice emerges when you are in the saddle of the story. If I am inspired, I think it flows quite naturally for me.

Part of *Tremor* was written in a residency at Bundanon – how did this time help develop the book?

I was thinking about this recently. Some funny things happened at Bundanon including me getting lost in the dense bush one morning not long before I ran out of phone battery and having to be rescued by one of the workers there. I was incredibly inspired by the physical environment, the light, the wombats and the huge kangaroos that hop around as if they own the place. I wrote for several hours each day in a paint-splattered cavernous space with an old leather couch;



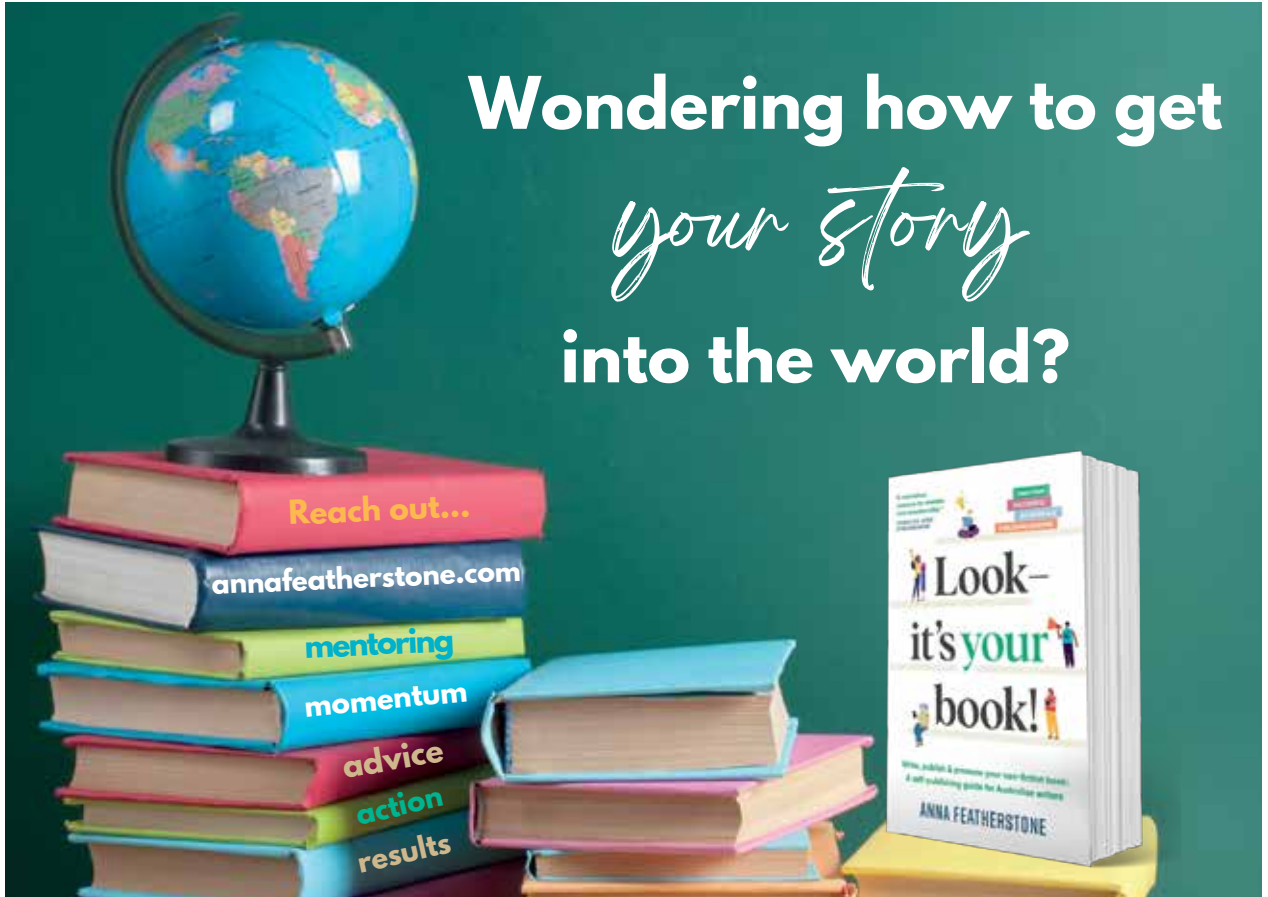
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and felt like I'd achieved a lot. Yet, most if not all of what I wrote during the residency ended up being edited out of the final version of the book. Of course that doesn't mean the work wasn't valuable. It was a vital part of the creative process and for getting me into the mindset for my upcoming brain surgery, which became the spine of the story.

Can you tell us a bit about the response or reviews to the book – has it been pleasing?

The reviews have been pleasingly positive as has the critical response to the book generally. My neurologist who features in *Tremor* reckons it is the only book about having dystonia to have been written by a professional writer, in Australia at least. Several people have contacted me privately to say they have read the book and how it has helped them or someone close to them. I even met a second cousin, whom I didn't know existed, through her reading the book as she had just been diagnosed with dystonia herself. One of the highlights for me was being interviewed by Richard Fidler for ABC's *Conversations*. That generated a lot of feedback with one person commenting that she thought Richard and I must have been friends because it was such a warm, funny and natural conversation. Richard is an impeccable and delightful interviewer.

Can you give us a rundown of your participation at Byron Writers Festival,

and what it means to be involved with the event this year?

It was a thrill to be invited back for BWF2026, after missing out on my scheduled session last year due to the devastating weather and subsequent cancellation of most of the program. We had had several friends travel to the festival from Sydney in 2025, so the cancellation was especially disappointing, albeit unavoidable and tragic for all involved. I also felt devastated for the team, led by artistic director, Jessica Alice, who had worked so hard to create a brilliant program. This year will be different, and I think see the festival going back to its roots in addition to being as weather proofed as possible. The support and appreciation the festival gives our local writing community is heartfelt, authentic and intrinsic to the character of the festival. This year, I am appearing in a session called Byron Writers Spotlight with fellow local writers Jay McKenzie and Nicholas Timms to discuss, among other topics, the specific genres of each of our books: a novel, a thriller and a memoir.

What are you working on at the moment, what is your next writing project?

I am working on a novel set in Northern NSW. It's too early to say any more. My first book *Political Animals* (Ginninderra Press, 2008) was a novel inspired in part by my time as a political journalist based in Canberra. So, my next work will be a return to my fictional roots.

Tremor is published by Finlay Lloyd.

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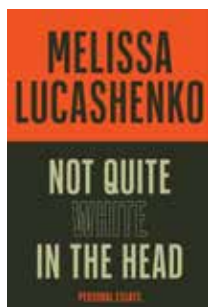
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Jessica Tracey



Extract:

Not Quite White in the Head by Melissa Lucashenko

I was having an extended break from writing. After four novels, I'd turned aside to put my heart and soul into a property near Billinudgel on Bundjalung Country in Northern New South Wales. (That property later became the setting for my novel *Mullumbimby* – literally another story.) Somewhat to my surprise, Professor Julianne Schultz, the brilliant founding editor of *Griffith Review*, rang me up with a proposal. I agreed and took time out from eradicating camphor laurels and ripping down rusty barbed wire fences to fly up to Palm Island. There, my kinship sister Gladys introduced me to one of her senior Elders, and at that Elder's kitchen table I learned about life for Bwgcolman people in the aftermath of the killing in custody of Mulrunji Doomadgee. Six months later, *Griffith Review* published 'Who Let the Dogs Out?'

Fast forward two decades, and as this book goes to print yet another Aboriginal man, Kumanjayi White, has just met his death in police custody. Kumanjayi, a Warlpiri man living in town due to his disabilities, died after being held down on an Alice Springs supermarket floor by two off-duty police. Frail, thin and, according to one former supermarket worker, clearly someone living with disability, Kumanjayi had allegedly been pinching chocolates. Between the killing of Mulrunji Doomadgee and the death of Kumanjayi White, hundreds of other Indigenous men, women and children have died in the custody of the Australian state. As one Koori community member asked angrily of the prison system while at a rally for another victim, the late David

Dungay Jr: 'How much training do they need to stop killing our people?' A question worth repeating, again and again, until it's answered, and until the killings cease. This pattern of lethal state violence towards Blak people (the term 'Blak' coined by the late artist Destiny Deacon, who began spelling the word without the 'c' because, she said, she was sick and tired of being called 'a Black c ...') seems so deeply entrenched in Australia as to be inevitable. It isn't inevitable. We First Nations lived here successfully and fruitfully for thousands of years, and we can do so again.

As I write in 'Staying White' – the most recent of these essays – Australia can join us in a better future. You don't need to be Indigenous to engage with First Nations mobs and our ancient, sustainable Law in the twenty-first century. You simply need to be a decent, mindful human who cares about your neighbours and the earth, and acts accordingly.

When we run our own communities in the future, using our own Aboriginal and Torres Strait methods of governance, our Blak lives will flourish. Our democratically elected First Nations body – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) – was beginning to slowly shift things in that direction, before former Prime Minister John Howard decided in 2004 to abolish it. He and much of white Australia took the position that, uniquely among Australian government bodies, ATSIC had to be entirely devoid of mismanagement or alleged criminality. No doubt the fact that ATSIC

was an Indigenous institution pressuring the federal government on native title at home and embarrassing it on human rights violations abroad, was pure coincidence.

'The First Australian Democracy' explores First Nations governance and asks about ways forward. Following the Liberal and National parties sabotage of the minimalist proposal – the 2023 First Nations Voice to Parliament Referendum – this essay remains, alas, just as relevant as it was when it was first published in 2015. The proposal for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice didn't offer much, on paper, but I'm old enough to remember that a lot of the criticisms levelled at it were also levelled at ATSIC in its beginning stages, too. And we absolutely need an elected First Nations representative body if anything is going to change.

Some of these essays are specifically about writing. 'On Bitin' Back' was commissioned for the re-publication of Vivienne Cleven's extraordinary first novel. It is a genuine pleasure to bring extra attention to Cleven's work, which is uproarious and gutsy in the best traditions of Outsider Art. 'On Writing Edenglassie' was a well-received keynote address, presented at the Brisbane Writers Festival in 2024. 'On Keri Hulme' allowed me to pay homage to the writer who has probably influenced me more than any other. 'The True Hero Stuff' – another keynote, delivered literally on the ground where my historical novel *Edenglassie* is set – is my attempt to explain why that novel was going to be different to any mainstream novel of colonial Queensland, and why it needed to be written.

There's a lot these essays don't cover. Despite my vague ambition to write a collection of travel writing – a non-existent collection which already has a title, *A Blackfella Abroad* – there's nothing here on my wanderings to central China, Europe or Indonesia, or to the Pacific. Given more time, I could have written about my great-grandmother Christina, and the ongoing mystery to us of her removal as an eight-year-old child. There's nothing much here on queerness, and my immediate family is absent: they deserve privacy. Nor have I written anything specifically about women in prison or about Sisters Inside, an organisation I've been involved with, one way or another, for thirty years. In fact,

only one essay, 'A Voice from the Rooftop of Boggo Road Prison', is solely about prison. It documents the horrific conditions inside Boggo Road Gaol at the time of the 1988 prisoner protests, and it does so in the words of a Scots Australian man who was living inside and a key part of the protest. My editor was unsure about including it, given that the words are mostly Gary's rather than mine, but I insisted. Own voices matter. My oldest brother, who did a couple of stints in Boggo Road before later becoming a successful businessman, is working on his own memoir. I hope one day you can read his words, as well as mine. In the meantime, Gary's voice lives on, long after the rooftop protests, which forced some brief changes to the regime of abuse that existed in Boggo Road.

If there's a connecting thread in these essays, it's that First Nations aren't going anywhere and that we are waiting to transform the nation for the better, given the opportunity. Our First Voices are, as Uncle Wesley Enoch says, the Elder culture of the planet. We have a chance to share the knowledge of thousands of generations with other, younger cultures, as the planet boils and the old world order implodes. There are clear alternatives to the insanity of global capitalism and techno-feudalism, and they lie with us, the Indigenous peoples of the earth.

A memory to finish with: Larrakia Country, 1990. I'm working for the Department of Social Security alongside the late Auntie Barbara Cummings, a very big personality who will soon be elected the Darwin chair of the brand-new political organisation, ATSIC (a long way from growing up in the Retta Dixon Home, viewing her mother only through a wire-mesh fence). A passing Social Security colleague chides Auntie Barb for her habit of pinching office supplies off the federal government. A sigh, and a long pause – Auntie Barb always had exquisite comic timing: 'We-e-e-ll, love,' she explains, as though to a small, rather dense child. 'They will go and put it on my land.'

Auntie Barb's inimitable voice that day has informed all of my writing since. I hope you find an echo of it in these essays.

– Bundjalung Country, 2025

Excerpt from *Not Quite White in the Head* by Melissa Lucashenko (UQP), out now via all good bookstores and online. Melissa will appear at Byron Writers Festival 2026.

Self Publishing Day

Full day program Friday 14 August

8:45am - 2:15pm

Wategos Room, Byron Community Centre
Entry with Friday Pass or 3-Day Pass

Find out everything you need to know about self publishing in a series of seminars, workshops and Q&A sessions with self-publishing powerhouses Ingram Spark and Bold Authors.

Writing Workshop: Believing You Can

8:45am - 9:45am (4)

Do you want to write, publish or do more with your book? This practical, one-hour workshop will leave you with a clearer head, a fuller heart, and the permission to create.

With Anna Featherstone

Supported by Bold Authors

The Future of Self Publishing

10:15am - 11:15am (11)

Paige Allen, Ben Hughes, Chris Munnery

Learn more about how to make it as an independent author, from print-on-demand to distribution services.

Chair Anna Featherstone

Supported by Ingram Spark

Self Publishing Nuts & Bolts

11:45am - 12:45pm (18)

Paige Allen, Madeline Bush, Ben Hughes

Learn how to publish your own books and ask all the questions from experts in the field.

Chair Chris Munnery

Supported by Ingram Spark

Fractured Motherhood

1:15pm - 2:15pm (24)

Maggie Walters in conversation
with Anna Featherstone

Self-published author Maggie Walters shares her incredible story and her self-publishing journey.

Supported by Bold Authors

Publishing Workshops

Meet The Agent: Alex Adsett

Friday 14 & Sunday 16 August (W)

Basq House Meeting Room
15 minute consultations, various times
\$180 General / \$140 Festival Friends

[BOOK NOW](#)

So you think you're ready to submit your manuscript to agents and publishers? Get one-on-one feedback on your manuscript from acclaimed literary agent Alex Adsett who represents over 40 artists and has helped thousands of authors get published.



Masterclass: Harnessing Wonder

Saturday 15 August
1:30pm – 3:30pm (W)

Wategos Room,
Byron Community Centre
\$140 General / \$110 Festival Friends

[BOOK NOW](#)

Join award-winning author Kathryn Heyman (*Circle of Wonders*, *Fury*, and more) for an inspiring masterclass exploring how wonder brings writing alive. The masterclass combines deep writing, craft and strategy guidance.

Inside Publishing Day

Full day program

Sunday 16 August | 10:00am – 3:30pm
Wategos Room,
Byron Community Centre
\$260 General / \$220 Festival Friends

[BOOK NOW](#)

Spend a day with the Australian publishing industry for a rare look inside how book deals are made and how you can best position yourself as an author.

Featuring Lex Hirst (Pantera Press), literary agent Alex Adsett, Anna O'Grady (Simon & Schuster), Peri Wilson (Allen & Unwin), Brendan Fredericks (BFredericksPR). Hosted by Marele Day.

What We're Reading

What we're reading, and where it's taking us...

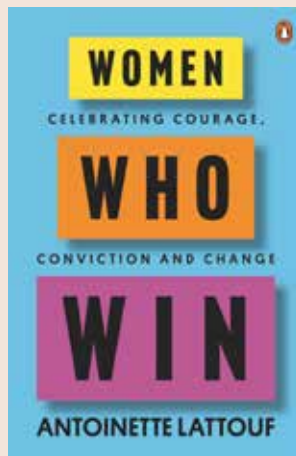


Good Witch

by Lucianne Tonti

Gardener. Gossip. Spinster. Healer. Nymph. A rage-inducing, thoroughly entertaining exploration of the effect witch trials had on our culture, then and present. Tonti traverses with such clarity how women's intuition and natural strengths were degraded, how the trials created fear in our collective connection to the earth and diminished our own understanding, and enchantment of nature.

Courtney Miller
Chair of the Board

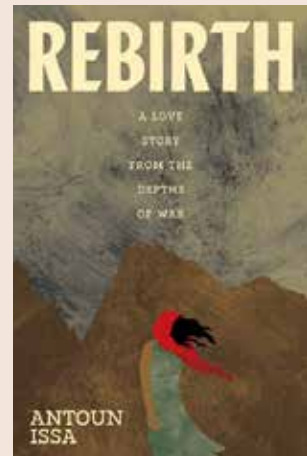


Women Who Win

by Antoinette Lattouf

An inspiring, fiercely intelligent celebration of Australian women who challenged power and changed history. Woven throughout is her own incredible story of defiance and the deep personal cost. What would you have done if you were in her shoes? *Women Who Win* is a fascinating and galvanising read that is also full of heart.

Clare McGregor
Programming Manager



Rebirth

by Antoun Issa

In *Rebirth*, Issa has accomplished an astute telling of the Lebanese Civil War, threaded between a deeply moving story of love and family. Drawing on his mother's own experience, the story captures both the beauty of Lebanon and the horror of war, and ultimately, the power of enduring hope.

Jessica Alice
Artistic Director and CEO





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**Southern
Cross
University**

30 years of partnership, stories and community

As a founding partner, Southern Cross University's relationship with Byron Writers Festival has grown from a shared commitment to storytelling, ideas and community into a lasting collaboration grounded in creativity and place.

Across three decades, we have helped foster conversations that challenge, inspire and connect, amplifying voices from our region and beyond and celebrating the people and stories that shape our community.

As Byron Writers Festival marks its 30th anniversary, Southern Cross University is honoured to celebrate this milestone, recognising the stories, thinkers and community that continue to shape who we are, now and into the future.



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