

## **An Interview with Robert Drewe**

*WHAT role did books play in your life when you were growing up?*

As a child growing up in Perth I loved to read. Books played a big part in my life – *The Coral Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*, the *William* books, the *Famous Five*, *Biggles*, and various encyclopaedias – I loved them – but so did comic books and comic strips. Television came late to Perth, and for entertainment the other kids and I depended on comics and the radio – and Saturday afternoon movie matinees, of course. I constantly read and swapped comics. I was a student of comic artists – *Dick Tracy's* creator, Chester Gould, and *The Phantom's* Lee Falk, for example, and the *Perth Daily News's* cartoonist Paul Rigby, and I endlessly copied their drawing styles.

During the summer holidays I'd read twenty books and still manage to spend all the daylight hours outdoors, playing in and around the Swan River. But I always had a book going. In primary school I was always the last kid to leave the library on Wednesday afternoons. I also fell upon the American magazines my father brought home from the office – the *Saturday Evening Post* and *National Geographic* and *Life*, even the *Ladies' Home Journal*. I even read the ads. They seemed to represent a more imaginative and flamboyant world than the one I lived in.

My parents owned only five or six novels but they were regular library users and they encouraged me when they saw how I loved reading. I used to sneak into their bedroom when they were out and troll through the best-sellers they had borrowed. *Peyton Place*, *Not As A Stranger*, *Lust for Life* and *From Here to Eternity* were great eye-openers. I was careful not to let on, though, or lose their place, or there would've been hell to pay.

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*WAS there anyone who influenced your decision to become a writer when you were young?*

Only recently I've realised that my high-school English teacher, Mr A.C. "Monkey" Marshall, probably influenced my decision as much as anyone. He wasn't the mentor type, not by a long way. He was the deputy headmaster and Chief Punisher, given to cryptic asides one minute and ferocious rages and canings the next, six of the best on the backside, during which his monkey resemblance became more pronounced. There was much white-hot rage and flailing arms and flying spittle.

He had – thankfully – never paid me any special attention. Then in my last year he twice read out my creative-writing compositions to the class, reading them without his usual sarcasm, and those ultra-cool seventeen-year-olds actually fell silent and listened. When I got over the embarrassment of being approved of by Monkey, a possibility began to dawn on me.

I was lucky that my youthful range of talents was narrow – no maths or science, just English and art – and, after school classes, swimming and middle-distance running. So once the naive pipedream of Olympic Games selection had faded, the choice was either writer or cartoonist. I edited the school magazine, the "Cygnet, and wrote most of it, collated the sports results, liased with the printers, and did much of the art work and cartoons. The vocational guidance tests we undertook before leaving school labelled me as an "outdoor aesthete", which brought to mind a thoughtful farmer, or perhaps an artistic lifeguard.

I was torn between two cadetships offered to me on the "West Australian" newspaper – in the art department or in journalism. But when I toured the art department the press artists all seemed to be air-brushing out footballers' underarm hair, painting in missing teeth in social photographs or drawing isobars on weather maps. So journalism was an easy choice. I began work as a cadet reporter on my 18th birthday. It seemed to offer everything I wanted. I thought I'd be paid to write, to travel and to have adventures – and to some degree that was the case. I loved it. We were paid \$22 a week and I would have paid them.

Even then I knew I wanted to be a writer, but I didn't know where Writing Headquarters was. Or who was the person in charge of writing. The editor of the "West Australian" seemed the nearest thing to it.

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*WHAT prompted you to start writing your first novel? How did you find the time, when you were employed and had a young family?*

This sounds strange, but one Saturday afternoon in my mid-twenties I was playing in the park with my two little sons when I had a sort of epiphany. A blazing notion. I thought, "I'm going to write novels." It was a sudden irresistible urge, so strong it was almost sexual, to write novels. Or maybe it was to be a novelist -- not necessarily the same thing. Anyway I said to myself, "I'll do this." And on Monday morning I went in and resigned my job.

As it happened, it was a false start and that first attempt at a novel ran out of steam. I was all intention and no application. I was too young and had nothing interesting to say. I quickly ran out of money and had to find a new job. Next time, a couple of years later, I took the precaution of keeping the job and writing the novel before and after work. I had something to say this time, and I wrote the first 100,000 words of "The Savage Crows" on the kitchen table when the children had gone to bed, and at weekends and during holidays.

At the time I was the daily columnist and literary editor on "The Australian", jobs I had steered myself into, I guess, because of their relative proximity to book writing and literature. And in my own time I plugged away on this first novel. I'd give up in disgust and then get a fresh wind and surge into it again. Anyway on the basis of what I'd written I was lucky enough to get a one-year Literature Board grant which enabled me to resign my job and finish it.

This peer acceptance -- the approval of my literary superiors, really -- meant everything to me, much more than the eight thousand dollars that accompanied it. It really raised my creative spirits and gave me the confidence to begin to consider myself a fiction writer.

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*YOU began your writing career as a journalist. What has this background done for you as a fiction writer?*

Obviously I have no way of knowing what my work would be like if I'd had a different background. But I had only ten years of full-time journalism and I've spent three times that long as a novelist. I had pretty highly developed observation skills before I went into journalism, but it enhanced these. It developed my taste for clarity in writing. I like every word to mean something. I'm not crazy about wilful adverbs and adjectives. I dislike self-consciously *exquisite* writing; it makes my fillings ache. We junior reporters on the "West Australian" had an excellent taskmaster as cadet counsellor, a dour Scot named Jim Dunbar, who would go over our copy with us when it came up from the composing room with the sub-editors' corrections on it. He'd point out our factual errors and cliches and potential libels and unacceptable grammar. He'd say, "You've got to speak directly to the reader." Perhaps I should credit him with assisting my early writing style.

What journalism did accomplish was to take a naive eighteen-year-old from the suburbs of a conservative provincial city and shove his nose into real human drama: courts, crime, politics, the Claremont-Cottesloe Ladies' Croquet Club results. While still a teenager I covered human conflict for a living. I saw murderers and human corpses and corrupt policemen and drunken politicians. The scales were lifted from my eyes, you could say. I got an inkling of how the Perth Establishment operated. And the city's underside. Even today I can easily conjure up the carbolic acid smell of the holding cells at the old Perth police courts. That period of my adolescence, the time I wrote about in *The Shark Net*, has stuck in my imagination and coloured my work ever since. It has influenced some of my characters. More than anything it showed me the dreadful possibility that life could suddenly go terribly wrong. It gave me a taste for drama. More than that -- an expectation of drama.

I admire good journalists. By the same token, I was right to get out of full-time journalism when I did, in my late twenties, when there was still time to balance its inherent scepticism and suspicion -- the cynical, seen-it-all-before philistinism embraced in every newsroom I ever worked in. It's a different mind-set. While it was valuable for me to learn that many people out there in the world are on the take, it was important for me as a beginning writer to realise that most people actually are not. Their lives are quietly desperate in other ways.

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*WHAT is writing for you? With a book such as The Shark Net, that deals with both personal memories and events that shaped the atmosphere of Perth for you as a young man, is it fair to read a therapeutic sense of self into the text?*

Well, I hope it gives something of a sense of self, seeing as it's a memoir. As for therapy, maybe I was hoping to work out old guilts along the way. But what I was really impelled to do, after all these years, was set down various tumultuous events in order to try to make sense of that period in my life, in my family's life, and the community I grew up in.

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*THE beach is a theme in much of your writing, and associated writing such as the Penguin Book of the Beach which you edited. In The Shark Net, you refer to West Australians as "The Sand People". How do you see Australian beach culture today... is it dying?*

*Reviewers tend to forget that the majority of my novels, like The Drowner, Our Sunshine, The Savage Crows, Grace and A Cry in the Jungle Bar have nothing to do with the coast. Indeed, three of them are historical novels, set in what could called the outback. The coast features more in my short stories.*

As for the beach culture, I wouldn't say it was dying, with ninety percent of the population living on the coast and a hundred per cent of them hankering after a water view. It's not a major concern of mine as subject material, but it did surprise me when I wrote my third book, *The Bodysurfers*, in 1983, that Aust Lit hadn't recognised this fact, somehow hadn't noticed that the coast dominated contemporary culture. Every other art form, from painting to music to photography, was well aware of the coast. But the Miles Franklin-approved literary backdrop was still the outback. English departments especially were very disapproving of the coast as a milieu. It was supposed to be too hedonistic and not to have the required spirituality for literature. I think the English departments were still reflecting the timidity of D.H. Lawrence, who had found the New South Wales south coast beaches, and the young men frolicking on them, so physically threatening. When he was writing *Kangaroo* he was worried about their muscular thighs.

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*HOW has living in different cities, and in different countries, affected your work? What has this travel done for someone who "writes Australia" so well?*

I used to see travelling and fiction writing as interchangeable occupations, even as part of the same emotional state. At twenty-one my urge to travel was so strong it was almost overpowering. But I had a young family and couldn't afford to go. I had to wait to be sent by some news organisation. I used to daydream about wearing seersucker suits and drinking gin and tonics in tropical hotspots. Of course when I eventually got to places like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan there was very little time or place for seersucker suits.

There's a remark by Ian McEwan in *A Move Abroad* that resonates with me: "Choosing a new form in which to write bears some resemblance to travelling abroad. The sense of freedom is no less useful for being illusory or temporary. The new place has its own rules and conventions, but they are not really yours, not quite yet. What you notice first is the absence of the old familiar restraints, and you do things you would not do at home."

I agree with that. I still love travelling but I couldn't live overseas for long periods any more. I'm increasingly fascinated by this strange country.

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*AS a literary writer, how important are literary prizes? You are well qualified to answer this!*

That's an interesting perception, like the one that I write only about the coast. For the record, I didn't receive a literary first-prize until 1996, exactly twenty years after my first novel. I began to wonder what I was doing wrong or whom I'd offended. I was usually on all the short-lists, but always the bridesmaid. Eventually *The Drowner* broke the ice.

Of course prizes are nice for the winner but you have to realise they're a lottery. As for their importance, frankly it only really counts in terms of sales and reputation if you win an overseas one. The old cultural cringe still thrives in the literary media and in Aust Lit. The critics and journalists put immense stock in London or New York opinion. Short of the Nobel, only the Booker has entrenched itself in the minds of the media and public. It has become a sort of celebrity prize. Its winners are seen as either deep intellectuals or larrikin rock stars. Win the Booker and people rush to buy your book for Christmas gifts. No author is sneezing at the local prizes, of course. It's always flattering to win one. Let's face it, every literary writer in Australia always needs the money, and it's certainly a welcome ego boost when you're still mentally flattened after finishing the novel and doing the compulsory promotional tour.

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*I'VE that read that you enjoy judging competitions, particularly discovering new talent. What is it that stands out to you in prize-worthy writing?*

An original voice. As simple as that. Something fresh. The *wow!* factor. Something that gives me a jolt, that doesn't seem indelibly stamped with the creative-writing course. Something not typed in single space on both sides of the paper or decorated with imaginative fonts and smiley faces.

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*WHAT is it like having your work adapted for stage, screen etc? What are your views on such adaptations – are you able to let go?*

It's a very complex feeling that gets even more complicated as the film, or television series or whatever nears completion. You must let it go, or there'll be tears before bedtime. I like Hemingway's take-the-money-and-run view of the process, because you're never going to be entirely satisfied with what happens to your original story. Literature and film are different art forms and I respect them equally. One has to be transformed into the other.

Having said that, there are some territorial aspects that will always confound me. It's like the fox terrier pissing on the lamp post of the previous cocker spaniel -- there is much marking of territory for its own sake, not because it necessarily improves on the original. Perhaps this is a male scriptwriter and director thing. They're like rhinos or warhogs. They hate to stand passively by and let something go without overlaying it with their own product.

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*WOULD you describe the road to publication for your first published novel?*

Once it was finished – that was the hard part -- it wasn't too complicated. Eventually I realised *The Savage Crows* was as finished as it would ever be. I submitted it to Ken Wilder at Collins on my birthday. I thought this might be a good omen, seeing that I'd started work as a journalist on my birthday, and left Perth for the big-time on my birthday. Ken sent it out to five readers. Four liked it and one didn't. Interestingly, the one who strongly advised Collins against publication -- not realising that they'd tell me -- was a friend and confidant of mine, a would-be writer himself, with whom I'd discussed the book on a weekly basis while writing it -- and whom I'd substantially financially assisted with reviewing jobs when I was literary editor of *The Australian*. Putting his action in the best light, I guess you could say he was behaving in a commendably rigorous critical manner.

Eventually Collins told me they'd publish it if I cut 20,000 words from it. My razor worked with the speed of light.

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*YOU are well respected and adored by readers as much for short stories as your novels. How important are short stories? What's their attraction?*

Adored? I'd love to see more evidence of that. I think short stories are as important as novels. I'm much more fond of them than I used to be. I went against the grain, I suppose, in writing two novels before I'd written a single short story. Most writers start out with the short story. I still feel fond of *The Bodysurfers*, my first story collection. It's never been out of print and has put food on the family for 35 years, which is quite unusual for a book of stories.

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*I'D like to talk about the actual craft of writing. Would you take us through a typical writing day for you?*

If I wake early, I start writing. This could be any time after five a.m. before the house is awake. Otherwise I start about 9.30 after the school run, and after I've read the morning papers. I stop work at about 1p.m. for lunch and for some sort of exercise, usually a swim or surf. If I'm swimming laps I can think about the book I'm writing. It's hard to work again when the kids are home from school so I don't even try. I get to the desk again about 9. Then I do another couple of hours. I don't watch much television. Towards the end of a book the hours greatly increase. Some of the most important work-time though is spent away from the desk. I've worked out all sorts of writing problems while trudging along a beach. The point is, even when you're not writing you're writing.

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*WHAT starts a book for you? An observation, event, memory?*

Maybe all these things. *The Drowner* began with one intriguing word. I opened a book in a Wiltshire bookshop, in Bradford-on-Avon where my father's family had come from in the 1850s, and saw that there used to be a skilled rural occupation called drowning. I thought, *Great!*

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*I THINK all writers are observers -- at least the good ones. You seem more observant than most, and you are very well equipped to share that with readers. Has observing always been a conscious thing for you?*

I think it was more unconscious once than it is now. The antennae are more alert these days.

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*WHAT'S the most gratifying aspect of what you do?*

I find it most gratifying when an actual reader tells me she or he has genuinely enjoyed my book.

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*WHAT is your advice to aspiring writers?*

Read widely, read all the good writers, old and new, even on topics that don't particularly interest you. And keep a journal and write in it every day.

*IS it easier or harder now for a first-time writer to get published, compared to when you were starting out?*

I'm not sure if it's easier to get published. But there are many more young writers about, so I suppose that answers the question.

There was no kudos in being a young novelist when I started. No special prizes. There were no interviews with young writers in the weekend papers or moody photographs on the beach or in urban alleys like there are now.

When my old paper *The Age* reviewed my first novel, *The Savage Crows*, they gave it to a 92-year-old reviewer. He reviewed it last on the end of a long list of military memoirs and books on mountain climbing. He summed it up in one sentence: "This book is too sexual for my liking." He died shortly after.

--- **Interview by James Phelan, in *Literati***