

Acknowledging Country

Like Nigel, I acknowledge that we meet on the land of the Kaurna people, the Adelaide Plains Traditional Owners. I honour and respect their Elders, past, present, and emerging.

Welcome

Thank you, everyone, for being here. Welcome to my home. I am honoured that you've taken time from your busy lives to celebrate with me today.

I especially thank the wonderful Jude Aquilina, a writer and poet who contributes so much to the literary arts in South Australia and who, as of today, has launched four of my books. She seems to understand my stories better than I do.

Thank you, too, Nigel Ford; you are a true poet and the best MC in town, having accepted that role for five of my eight books.

A special thank you to Veronica Cookson, my dear friend and fellow poet, for the great blurb she wrote. If I run out of puff, Veronica is ready to step in and speak for Marigold.

Finally, I have to mention how lovely it is to have my two children here with me: Vanessa, from Victor Harbour, and Mark, all the way from Brisbane...you'll meet them at the book table, and you'll see Mark taking photos.

A little bit about the book

I tend to confuse genres in my writing. In my last book, *They Who Nicked the Sun*, I worried whether I'd written a novel or an ethnography. In fact, that book was a hybrid.

Call Me Marigold is about my life, but it does not fit the genres of memoir or autobiography. Instead, although it does not have a typical heroic journey like a novel, it is fiction, framed by a fragmented structure that disrupts time and dislocates reality, to mirror how memory works.

The story takes shape through vignettes, text fragments and poems and is narrated posthumously under a pseudonym. In other words, our fictional Marigold, who is literally in limbo as a literary device, seeks to understand her life as a series of unforgotten moments.

Why this project?

I truly don't know why this project came to mind. Maybe old people just like to talk about the past. I think they call it relevance deprivation. Oddly enough, though, while I've gathered family histories, taught life writing, been a lifelong people watcher—as a child in pubs, watching the crowds at the footy with my father while he followed the game—and later, as an anthropologist—I've never been one to read such tales.

I suspect what really got me started on this project was simply the idea of writing something from a posthumous perspective. It tickled my fancy and roused my curiosity as an exercise. It sounded like fun to write from beyond the grave, but as often happens, the writing soon took on a life of its own.

While ideas are exciting, bringing them to life on the page can often be fraught, especially with life writing. Questions arise: what should I use or leave out, where can I embellish, and how do I deal with the ethics of mentioning others? Nobody wants to be sued.

So, except for a couple of well-known military figures and a journalist whose name had to be cited, I found it easier to render everyone anonymous. People are identified only by their roles in relation to Marigold, such as mother, father, and so on.

Writing about your life, of course, means revisiting both joyful and difficult times. It highlights how very fragile and selective our recollections can be. While I've been frank about many things that may shock, please know that putting them on the page was liberating for me.

EXCERPTS

As I read the following two snippets, please remember that it is the deceased Marigold speaking from limbo, where she is stuck, trying to understand her life before she can rest on the other side.

Childhood freedom in Albury, NSW

By contemporary standards, the things we did as preteens may seem ridiculous. But my strongest memories were of immense freedom and the joy of being with my friend J. I remember us riding on the centreline of a wide, empty street in the shade of giant plane trees in Albury, standing on the pedals, pushing for speed, then flopping back onto the seat to kick our legs out as we free wheeled from the effort, screaming, poo, bugger, bum, and laughing so hard our tummies ached, convinced that our words would fly higher than a kite. Such a long time ago, such naïveté, we had yet to learn what would happen to us when we became women, as defined by puberty.

My parents liked J. They used to admonish us with a smile to beware of tramps when we went bush on our bicycles. We never bumped into a tramp, but the warning brought a frisson of fear to our adventures. I never worked out whether my parents meant to scare us or were genuinely worried about tramps, having lived through the Great Depression, when homeless men walked this vast land seeking work.

We also rode on country roads as free as birds, looking for an appealing stand of gums inside a farmer's fence that told us a creek would be nearby. We only ever found dry creek beds, but we'd lie down beneath the grey-green swoop of eucalypt leaves at its banks, with arms behind our heads, our eyes following dappled white clouds race across the sky through the canopy. We had our quiet moments, reflecting, dreaming, and listening to the bush on still days. Its whispering air, rustling leaves, and grasses, bird song, crows cawing, insects buzzing, and maybe even a baa or a moo in the distance, until one or the other of us would speak, breaking the spell.

The power of a shower in the bush- a decade or so later

I loved the outback, the desert silence, the heat, the flies, the red earth and blue skies of the Australian bush. Many years later, this love found its way into my poems. Likewise, the tropics between Darwin, where I spent over fifteen years, one way or another, and Sri Lanka, where I met my 3rd husband much later. One of my favourite moments of the Oodnadatta days was showering at

the outdoor public showers, on an otherwise empty road on flat gibber plains, stretching to the horizon between the pub and the airport. Solid concrete, no doors, but those hot, high-pressure bore water showers cleansed us deep down and kept us warm in the cool desert air. A couple of female friends and I often went together or met there after a party or a night with a lover, and we'd stand for what seemed like hours, sharing, grizzling, and giggling as young women do. Sometimes, especially in winter, I'd go alone, just for the sensual wonder of the brisk cold desert air, and the stimulating warmth of the water flow. I thrilled to it all.

Me speaking again now: Marigold is really not new. I reckon she came to life briefly ten years ago in the following poem, which has the last word here, as it has in the book.

My Skeleton and Me

I met my skeleton this morning
as it sneaked into my mind —
there it was,
giant teeth
infinite grin
staring straight at me,
eye sockets so deep
my skin and flesh
drowned in their hollows,
yet we laughed, giant
jagged-jaw giggles
and with each guffaw
drew closer—
tied to me by tendons
cushioned by muscles
my bony friend held me
in a cradle of ribs

that hurt as we
cackled together
for my leg twitched at random,
warm and soft on the outside
skinny and hard within—
what a wicked joke life is
we agreed:
of a sudden, I felt sad
bones outlast flesh I thought,
without blood supply
my friend's smile will turn to rictus,
grotesque on lonely bones
unless — ah! yes
if I choose cremation,
we shall convulse together one last time
in the furious flames of extinction.