

# Deakin Research Online

**This is the published version:**

Evans, Richard 2010, Richard Evans, true crime writer and academic, talks frankly with INSCRIBE about books, history, and the origins of his interests, *Inscribe*, no. 3, Summer, pp. 3-3.

**Available from Deakin Research Online:**

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30037148>

Reproduced with the kind permissions of the copyright owner.

**Copyright** : 2010, Darebin City Council

Real is what I hear, touch, see—what is here now is real to me.

## Joanna Liakakos: *with the eyes of a woman*

JENNY STAMATELOS

She stands in front of shelves filled with books. Rows upon rows of visitors have shared her world. The phrase 'it's all Greek to me' would describe her work in the library. In the early years, migrants entered the Northcote Library seeking assistance. Regardless of background, many felt a sense of embarrassment, for the little or no English. The passion she felt towards her community (a Darebin resident for the most part) earned her the Victorian Multicultural Award for Excellence.

A first attempt at writing a novel at 19 years is sabotaged by personal thoughts. Considering her life, she embarks upon a life changing experience. Having completed accounting/business studies in Athens, she migrates to Australia in the 1950s.

Married, raising a family, she finds herself doing a variety of jobs, in cake, carpet and tobacco factories, as a Westgarth milk bar owner,

a tutor and a Librarian, attending night classes at RMIT.

At the age of 43 writing finds its way into her life again. After her first book is published, she attempts her first poetry collection which is rejected. Joanna Liakakos to date has had 11 books published, including 5 poetry collections. She regularly has articles published in Melbourne and Sydney newspapers. In years gone by, she had her own column '*with the eyes of a woman*' that she secretly refers to as her own current affairs blog.

'I admit poetry is hard, but to write simple poetry is harder' she goes on explaining, when it's too complex, confusing, why bother reading.

'I sit down to consciously write an article but poetry comes from inspiration'. I write anywhere and everywhere—in the middle of class; in my sleep. I've even been inspired and written a poem while waiting in

line at the butcher's.

'I am amazed by beauty, happiness, inspired by sorrow; why things happen? Although I consider death strange, I accept it. When you are alive you feel death. Believing in ever-after is innocence. I stand to watch and write; I see it as a solution for sickness, old age and life continuance. Real is what I hear, touch, see—what is here now is real to me'.

Joanna Liakakos, founding member of the Hellenic Writers' Association based in Darebin and a retired librarian, still continues her work within the walls of the Northcote Library. She supports upcoming writers through a literature group that has been meeting for over two decades; 'People were always coming in for me to read something or help edit their work. The idea of forming a group, sort of came about on its own'.

'I enjoy the process of ink flowing onto paper'. 🐾



Image: Bookshelf Sitting, from Joanna Liakakos' private collection



**Did your interest in history begin in childhood? If so, how early and why?**

Ironically, my fascination with the past was inspired by a nightmare vision of the future: George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Reading this at about 13 made a huge impact on me. I read Orwell's writings about the crises of the Great Depression and the rise of Hitler and Stalin and became fascinated by this period, when humanity seemed to be going mad.

What I quickly learned was that what seems inevitable in hindsight doesn't feel that way to the people living and writing at the time.

The stream of history is messier, more complicated and much more interesting than written history appears—especially history as it is taught in schools, sadly.

**Richard Evans, true crime writer and academic, talks frankly with INSCRIBE about books, history, and the origins of his interests.**

But I do think these are exciting times for people who love history. After a long period of dreary political argument—the whole 'black arm-band versus Bradman's batting average' thing—there seems to be a new interest in recovering the exciting, complex truth of our lived experience. Through writing quality history, cracking yarns about real events, I hope to contribute to that.

**Tell us something about your academic and writing background.**

I have always been a bit of an intellectual bowerbird, and in my writing I try to reflect that diversity of interests: philosophy, cultural history, economics, social science, crime . . . unfortunately, we live in an age of specialists, which makes it difficult to place my work.

My early hero was George Orwell, whose style was jargon-free and accessible: simple words, lively metaphors, short sentences. In recent years I have become more adventurous, but Orwellian simplicity and clarity are still the benchmark.

**How were you inspired to write your book *The Pyjama Girl Mystery*?**

I stumbled on the Pyjama Girl by accident in the newspapers of September 1934, the month after the body was found. What struck me even then was how the popular histories of the Pyjama Girl did not reflect the case's fascinating complexities. Because she was not identified at the time, much of the endless

press speculation ended up being written as fact later on.

One example: everyone decided that the dead woman must have been beautiful. The body had been bashed, shot, dumped in a ditch and set on fire; it lay there for four days before being found. Not surprisingly, she was a horrific sight. Yet she became the 'lovely Albury Pyjama Girl'. It made me think that someone should try to peel beneath the surface and to discover how this had occurred.

**Tell us about your research methods for this book, and/or generally.**

I am a trained historian but also a creative writer, and I have studied the cultural importance of narrative. Wanting the original documents, I gained access to New South Wales Police records, enabling me to piece together the complex case. This left me with many unanswered questions. Also, I wanted to chart how the 'story' of the Pyjama Girl, as distinct from the reality, had been built up, and what that said about Australian culture and society. Part of that involved providing a well-researched overall history of Australian society, crime and popular culture, in the Depression years—balancing the 'ripping yarn' of murder and mystery with the nature of life 80 years ago.

**Your latest book is *Disasters That Changed Australia*. Why did you decide to write this book?**

I grew up near Geelong, and I have vivid

memories of the Ash Wednesday bushfires badly affecting the coastal area. People who lived through it became much more conscious of fire; respectful of the need to live in and with the land. But after a while complacency set in, and urban lives were lived in semi-rural areas.

As I studied Australian history, I realized that this pattern was a common one. A disaster would occur: Cyclone Tracy, the Black Friday bushfires of 1939, the Great Depression. Bitter lessons would be learned. But the disasters would be celebrated as examples of 'Aussie courage', when instead we were complacent, ignorant, or just plain stupid. There were also other events that were literally disasters: Australia's involvement in the First World War, or the Snowy Mountains Scheme. *Disasters that Changed Australia* is an attempt to challenge the comforting myths we tend to tell ourselves as Australians; it is a history, but also a plea for us to change our mindset.

**Can you tell us about plans for forthcoming publications?**

I want to return to crime, so to speak. In 1932 there was a horrible double murder in Sydney: two young people, Dorothy Denzil and Frank Wilkinson, disappeared and were found buried in separate shallow graves a few days later. I have been given permission to examine the archives relating to the case. It will be fascinating.