

The life and work of Elizabeth Jolley

England

Elizabeth Jolley was born near Birmingham in the Black Country of England's industrial Midlands, on June 4th 1923. Her father was an English pacifist, and her mother the daughter of an Austrian general, and their difficult relationship was characterised by an "anxious tenderness" on her father's part and her mother's "sense of both exile and entitlement" (Katharine England, STM).

Sent away to a Quaker boarding school at 11, by the age of 17 Elizabeth was nursing in war-torn London. She became a single mother in the Midlands before marrying Leonard Jolley, and when Leonard was given a job as chief librarian at the University of Western Australia, Elizabeth, by then the mother of three children, came to live in Perth, Australia. The year was 1959.

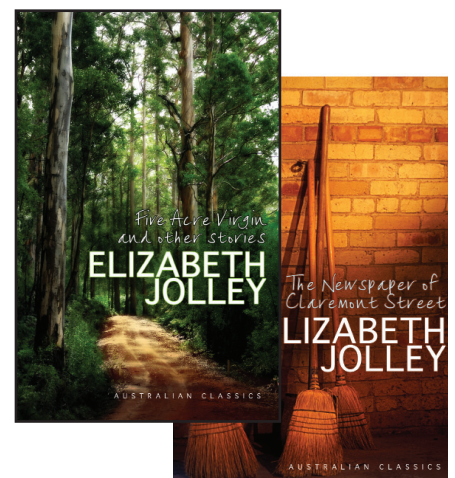
Australia

Financing her writing with jobs that included, in her own words, "door-to-door salesman (failed), real estate salesman (failed) and flying domestic" - the last of which proved most useful, since while cleaning "the mind is left free for the development of ideas" (Katharine England, STM) - Jolley persevered without publication. For twenty years she wrote novels and stories and for twenty years went unpublished, stoically sending off manuscripts again and again. One year saw her receive 39 rejection slips; until Fremantle Arts Centre Press took her first collection of stories, "and so Elizabeth Jolley, the author, began startling readers and writers across Australia" (Philip Salom, 'Tribute to the Late Elizabeth Jolley', Indigo). Salom continues:

Years later she discovered that publishers used pretty much the same few men (invariably) as manuscript assessors and these men did not like her womanly frankness and her wry take on fictional characterisation, and nor did they like her subtexts of lesbian relationships. She had the laugh on them.

Aged 53 when she was first published, Jolley proceeded to release a book roughly once a year between 1976 and 2001 - she had the benefit of many completed manuscripts sitting in drawers, but also produced new works. Her repertoire included four short story collections, 15 novels, three non-fiction titles, and several radio plays, and these began to steadily amass acclaim and awards.

Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories (1976) was her first published work (after a few individual stories that were published in journals in the 1960s), followed by *Woman in a Lampshade* (1980) and *Palomino* (1981). *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983) accompanied *Mr Scobie's Riddle* (also 1983), and the latter won *The Age Book of the Year*, the first of many awards and nominations.



She went on to win The Age Book of the Year more than once, the Western Australian Premier's Book Award, the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award (Christina Stead Prize for Fiction), the Canada/Australia Literary Award, the National Book Council Award and the highly regarded Miles Franklin Award, as well as other nominations. She was also honoured as the Western Australian Citizen of the Year in 1987, given Honorary Doctorates from Western Australian Institute of Technology (later Curtin), Macquarie University, and the University of Queensland, became an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for services to literature in 1988, and was made an Australian Living Treasure in 1997.

The Person and Work

Elizabeth Jolley's novels have been described as "wickedly black, understated novels that elevated the ordinary to celebrity" (STM Entertainment) and are often spoken of as Gothic. She wrote memoir also, in her autobiographical fiction trilogy (*My Father's Moon*, *Cabin Fever* and *The George's Wife*) and in explicit autobiographies (*Central Mischief*, *Learning to Dance*, and *Diary of a Weekend Farmer*). Even in fiction she was influenced by her childhood, her parents, and her second home of Western Australia. As Katharine England (STM) writes, after observing her life of many goodbyes:

It is no wonder that her novels are full of the pain of exile and loneliness, of inimical educational institutions, bewildering routine and wrenching, repetitive partings, all drawn with a bleak and gently self-mocking humour.

Her work has been described as "always drawing on family conflicts (isolation, desolation, homelessness)" (Ron Willis, *Perth Voice*, Dec 13 2008), as looking at "a kind of fracturing or displacement of the traditional family structure", although "she treats the family in all sorts of unusual ways; she's especially interesting on generation gaps, misunderstandings within the family, those sorts of issues" (The Book Show, Radio National, 20 Feb 2007).

Jolley was a unique character, in the way she dressed, in her habit of writing everything with a fountain pen dipped in ink, in her ability to surprise people with a sharp mind and dark humour unexpected from her vague and gentle manner. The author liked to take on different personas, and would often play the role of dithery old lady, "call everyone Dear and smile sweetly and, when she wanted to, she would pretend to have missed the point of some conversation, or public question, or even, sometimes, of a critical question made to her in an interview. It was a mask but it was also a sign of essential modesty." (Salom, 'Tribute to the late Elizabeth Jolley'). Helen Garner agrees, saying, "I think, like a lot of writers, she developed a kind of persona to get through the world. Hers was the batty old grandmother." Salom adds that on the other hand, "we would have hilarious evenings, often with Elizabeth playing yet another self, the wicked raconteur."

Jolley was "a sweet and unassuming person who writes delightfully depraved books" (Jane Cadzow, *The Weekend Australian*, Sep 22/23 1984). Salom describes her as "a kind person. She enjoyed the simple loyalties and privacies of friendship. She delighted in her children and grandchildren. She devoted herself to Leonard, her increasingly arthritic husband". Her friend, Helen Garner corresponded with her for twenty years and found her hilarious. "I remember writing to her once and saying that I couldn't sleep after some sad thing had happened to me

and she wrote back and said, if you can't sleep, don't just lie there. She said, get up, make yourself a cup of tea, get a biscuit and do your tax return" ('Australian writer Elizabeth Jolley remembered', ABC Radio, 20 Feb 2007).

Her writing and characters were drawn from her relationships and from observing people in everyday life. Once asked where she found her characters, she replied, "I don't really know. I suppose I must see something, I might see somebody in a shop, doing something, taking something or choosing something and that interests me. And I then might go home and make a note about it. Miss Thorne in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, I actually saw at a dinner party. Well, it was a buffet dinner, really, not where you sit around a table. I never spoke to the woman, but she was sitting on the floor in a navy blue frock, a very big pile of dark hair, a very powerful woman. That kind of thing will give me a character."

She claimed to simply write about "things - relationships - that interest me ... I like to explore things that I don't really understand" (Joyce Thompson, *The Australian*, May 26 1987). Yet always, her understanding of the human condition shone through in her writing. "Reading her," writes Salom, "was sometimes to feel sad, and then amused, and then to be caught into a kind of knowing but pleasurable embarrassment. She wrote like no-one else."

Professor Dennis Haskell agrees that she had an original style of writing. "She seemed to bring something rather different to our literature, a kind of odd eccentric bunch of characters dealing with often very dark issues, a lot of things about death that were sometimes treated very humorously - she was known for her black humour," he said (ABC online, Feb 20 2007).

Jolley took risks in her writing - her long wait for publication was due to the fact that her work included such material as murder and non-traditional sexualities. But she connected to the deep subtleties of human experience and that is what readers recognised.

A call-in listener to a radio interview shortly after the publication of *Lovesong* remarked that she appreciated how Jolley did not take the "darkness" out of Dalton's character, did not make a moral judgement about "deviancies that we all have." Another listener said reading Jolley's books was one of the great highlights of her life. "You stagger me," she told Jolley, "and I love to be staggered ... I like the way the characters [in *Lovesong*] are such a mix of vulnerability and frailty, knowledge, insights, resilience and beauty. Nobody is ever cheapened or scorned ... Jolley's readers knew all about Dalton's loneliness.

Jolley taught Creative Writing at Curtin University from 1975, and her students included many prize-winning authors, such as Tim Winton. *Doing Life: a biography of Elizabeth Jolley* was penned by her long-time Curtin colleague, Brian Dibble.

Elizabeth Jolley died on February 13th 2007, following her diagnosis with dementia.

Awards and nominations

1983: The Age Book of the Year Award for *Mr Scobie's Riddle*

1983: Western Australian Premier's Book Awards for *Mr Scobie's Riddle*

1985: New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, Christina Stead Prize for Fiction for *Milk and Honey*

1986: Miles Franklin Award for *The Well*
1987: Western Australian Citizen of the Year
1988: Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for services to literature
1988: Western Australian Institute of Technology Honorary Doctorate
1989: The Age Book of the Year Award, joint winner for *My Father's Moon*
1989: Canada/Australia Literary Award
1993: The Age Book of the Year Award, joint winner for *The George's Wife*
1993: Western Australian Premier's Book Awards, Premier's prize for *Central Mischief*
1994: National Book Council Award, Banjo for *The George's Wife*
1995: Macquarie University Honorary Doctorate
1997: Australian Living Treasure
1997: University of Queensland Honorary Doctorate
1998: Miles Franklin Award shortlist for *Lovesong*

Literary works

Novels:

Palomino (1980)
The Newspaper of Claremont Street (1981)
Miss Peabody's Inheritance (1983)
Mr Scobie's Riddle (1983)
Milk and Honey (1984)
Foxybaby (1985)
The Well (1986)
The Sugar Mother (1988)
My Father's Moon (1989)
Cabin Fever (1990)
The Georges' Wife (1993)
The Orchard Thieves (1995)
Lovesong (1997)
An Accommodating Spouse (1999)
An Innocent Gentleman (2001)

Short stories and plays:

Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories (1976)
The Well-Bred Thief (1977)
The Travelling Entertainer and Other Stories (1979)
Woman in a Lampshade (1983)
Off the Air: Nine Plays for Radio (1995)
Fellow Passengers: Collected Stories of Elizabeth Jolley (1997)

Non-fiction:

Central Mischief: Elizabeth Jolley on Writing, Her Past and Herself (1992)
Diary of a Weekend Farmer (1993)
Learning to Dance: Elizabeth Jolley, Her Life and Work (2006)

Resources

Radio programs and interviews:

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2009/2540055.htm>

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2008/2432613.htm>

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2007/1851909.htm>

<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2007/s1852402.htm>

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/latenightlive/stories/2008/2288284.htm>

Websites:

<http://www.john.curtin.edu.au/jolley/>

http://john.curtin.edu.au/jolley/awards_introduction.html

<http://www.middlemiss.org/lit/authors/jolleye/jolleye.html>

Tributes:

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/books/to-my-dear-liftrat/2005/06/25/1119321938126.html>

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/books/black-humour-jolley-heart/2007/02/22/1171733944846.html>

Buy:

<http://www.readings.com.au/collection/elizabeth-jolley>

<http://www.fremantlepress.com.au/authors/418/Elizabeth+Jolley>