

Tea Tree Passage - Background ...

Whether you love it or hate it, research is a fundamental part of any writing, particularly if your genre is historical fiction. And as Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) once said: *The greatest part of a writer's time is spent in reading, in order to write: a man will turn over half a library to make one book.*

I probably spend almost as much time researching a novel as I do writing it, although only a very small amount – approximately 10% – ever finds its way into my work. Research for *Tea-tree Passage* included reading books such as *Weevils in the Flour*, *Caddie*, and *The Battlers*, not to mention all those wonderful Ruth Park books set during the Depression years.

I researched the post-WWI growth of Sydney, sent to the Australian War Memorial for literature on war neurosis (especially W. H. R. Rivers work on the subject), and spent many hours on the Internet searching for songs and movies of the time, and WWII information on Americans in Brisbane.

Many of us tend to think of the two World Wars as being separated by the Great Depression. But that is only partly true. WWI was actually followed by ten years of boom time before the Depression kicked in. This was the era of the flappers and the Charleston, of a post-war building boom that eventually saw new suburbs springing up like mushrooms in the cities (especially Sydney). It was an era when women found themselves relinquishing their new-found freedoms. Unemployment was high and the men's jobs they had so willingly taken on during the war years, while the men were fighting overseas, were reluctantly handed back.

For Australia, the post WWI period was a time of social, economic and sexual change. The soldiers returning home found a country vastly different from the one they'd left. Jobs were scarce and initially building supplies even scarcer. During the war years there had been little housing growth but now, with the soldiers coming back, marrying and having families of their own, sometimes several generations of one family found themselves living together. And for the soldier husbands and sons, this was a time of huge adjustments, of fitting back into a society that sometimes seemed to have abandoned them.

So what's *Tea-tree Passage* about? It's about the ongoing effects of war – about how after the last bullet has been fired and the last bomb dropped, and the soldiers shipped home, how, for some men the war still goes on.

Tea-tree Passage has its beginning in the aftermath of WWI. My soldier character, Frank Carmody, returns to his family home in Tea-tree Passage, a fictitious tiny Queensland fishing community. He returns to Nina, a wife he scarcely remembers, scarcely knows – theirs being a hurried war-time marriage – but it has been the thought of her, the promise of their continued life together, that has kept him going through those terrible war years.

Frank returns to small-town life, working on his father's fishing boat. He returns to Nina who has learned to live without him, and comes home to obvious antagonism from his parents because his older brother, Bill – the family favourite – had *not* returned, and Frank feels himself somehow blamed for his brother's death.

Frank is hiding a dark secret from the war years. As time passes, he wants to talk over his problems but who to discuss them with? His wife, Nina, is keen to lay it all out in the open, but the thought of reliving it all to her terrifies him. What if he breaks down? What if he cries? He cannot bear the possibility of Nina seeing him like that, losing control.

And it was this way. Some men returned home physically maimed – maybe missing an arm or a leg, or their lungs ruined from exposure to mustard gas. But many came back with hidden wounds, officially called “war neurosis” but commonly known as “shellshock”. The war scenes continually marched through their dreams. They developed headaches, or maybe a small tic that worked continuously at their temples. They began drinking alcohol to mask the mental pain. And this went on for years, quietly eroding away at the very fabric of their lives and families.

Frank sees his old neighbour, Jimmy Melville, missing a leg and being pushed along in a wheelchair by his elderly mother. He thinks of his other friends, now dead on foreign battlefields, and wonders if it might have been better if he'd died there too, rather than returning home to the living nightmare he was now part of.

The first part of *Tea-tree Passage* details the gradual and inevitable downslide of Frank and Nina's marriage, through the post-war boom years of the 1920s, then the Depression years of the '30s. The boom-time business Frank had built has long gone, and the family finds itself on the seat of its pants. Frank wanders the countryside in search of work and the freight trains become a way of life. Finally he tells a stranger the shocking war-time secret he has kept hidden from his family. In some ways he wishes death will come and take him from all this. He comes home one last time to Nina and the children, knowing he cannot stay.

The following is an example – pages 227–230 – of Frank's eventual behaviour ...

He came home as winter approached, dreading the cold. Came home to his children's resentful faces, Nina's accusing silence.

'Where have you been, Dad? We were worried.'

Were they? He hadn't made any effort at contact for six long months. They were managing okay without him, as well as any other family on the street. Joe's job at the fruit shop. Nina's few hours at the laundry. Dole rations. Scrimping. Making do.

He felt superfluous. Not part of them. A phantom useless father. One Saturday night someone offered him a job playing a violin at a dance. The pay was ten shillings, which had to be shared with the pianist. At midnight the dancers took the hat around and collected another two shillings. When he finally begged away at 2am, he stumbled along the streets until he came to an all-night bar.

Dawn was almost breaking as he let himself in the front door. He tiptoed into the children's room and sat for a while by their beds, seeing their smoothed-out sleeping expressions in that early pre-dawn light, the small hollows and indentations of their faces.

In the room he shared with Nina, he looked down on the curled form of his wife, watched the shadowy rise and fall of her chest. A pain rose inside him, a mixture of despair and grief.

I can't stay.

The words flittered about him, demanding acknowledgement. Mechanically he took his few remaining clothes from the makeshift wardrobe: two rows of stacked-up fruit boxes with a string line between them. When he was done, only two threadbare dresses of Nina's remained. For one long moment he stared at them, two limp pieces of fabric, poor excuses for clothes. A fragment of memory came to him: those long-ago rows of dresses and coats, ball gowns and blouses. What had happened to reduce them to this?

Her voice came from nowhere, disturbing his reverie. 'What are you doing, Frank?'

He pictured her lying there in the almost-dark, watching him with those grey sorrowful eyes.

'Packing.'

'Where are you going?'

'Away.'

'You're not coming back.'

It was a statement, not a question, and required no answer. What to say, anyway? She was silent for a moment. Then. 'Is there someone else? Another woman?'

'No.'

'Don't lie to me, Frank. I'm tired of it.'

He gave a bitter laugh. 'There's no-one, Nina. Who'd want me, anyhow?'

A faint sigh escaped her mouth. 'How will we get by?'

'You'll manage. God only knows, you have until now.'

He snapped the lid of the suitcase shut and placed what was left of his night's earnings on the window sill. 'It's not much, but there's a few bob to tide you over.'

She was lying propped on her elbows in the bed, a mass of disheveled dark curls about her head. In that faint pre-dawn light, her face was a blur of white. Her mouth, when it opened, seemed a dark hole into which he might fall.

'Frank! Please!'

He wanted badly to kiss her one last time. Wanted to place his mouth against hers, to taste her skin and warmth. Wanted to say, 'I'm sorry', and try to explain the reasons he thought it had all gone wrong. But the years, and all those harsh and unretractable words, had become a barrier between them.

So he picked up the suitcase, testing its weight in his hand. 'Goodbye, Nina.'

Two words ending a marriage, aborting a lifetime of memories. Without any further sound, he turned and let himself out the door.

Frank and Nina's three children emerge scarred, although in different ways, from the influences of their childhood. So what will happen to Claire, Joe and Lydia as the world is thrust again in to another war in 1939?

Well, you'll just have to read the book to find out!

Best wishes and happy reading.

Robyn Lee Burrows

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