

WRITING, PUBLISHING AND NATURE IN THE KIMBERLEY

On 6 February, Pat Lowe, who is an author, publisher and environmentalist, spoke to the Kimberley Society. Flown down from Broome as a guest speaker, Pat proved very popular and attracted an audience that filled our venue. Pat's friend and fellow Kimberley Society member Sandy Toussaint brought along some of Pat's published works, and members took advantage of the opportunity to buy those books, and copies of Pat's latest book (*In the Desert*) at discount prices. The following summary, generously provided by Pat, captures the coverage that was offered on the night.

I have always been a writer. As a child I used to write stories, and I once started an Enid Blyton-inspired novel on hotel notepaper. At school, I wrote a play called 'The Stranger', and made my friends and other children play the various parts during recreation, while I directed them.

Unfortunately, my mother thought she had a child prodigy on her hands, and introduced me to a man named Mr Durrant, who was said to be interested in children's writing. After talking to me for a while, Mr Durrant asked me to write something for him, 500 words in length, on any subject.

Paralysed by this important commission, I stopped writing altogether. Writing, which I had done naturally, unselfconsciously, for myself, now became a task for someone else. Perhaps the worst thing about it was the lack of specificity: any subject, Mr Durrant had said. I never even got as far as deciding on a topic. But the commission weighed on me heavily: as long as I hadn't written anything for Mr Durrant, I couldn't write anything else. And so I no longer wrote even for the school magazine.

It wasn't until I was well into adulthood that I started writing again, just for myself. I never did it with the same casual joyfulness of childhood, and I spent far more time sitting in front of blank sheets of paper than producing anything, but just occasionally I would manage a short story.

The first thing I ever had published was a humorous feature in *The West Australian* about my first attempt to sail a boat, for which I was thrilled to receive \$50. I went on to write a few—very few—more stories for magazines: about bushwalking, about dogs, about running. I even had a very bad rhyming poem published in *Gallop On*.

My greatest ambition was to write a book. If I wrote a book and had it published, I would be fulfilled, I believed, and was cravenly admiring of anyone who had done so. My problem was, what could I write a book about? I didn't seem to have the imagination of a novelist, having lost that, along with my interest in my mentor, Enid Blyton, in my childhood.

The years went by, and by the time I was in my forties I was convinced I would never write a book. But then, almost by chance, I found my subject.

I met my muse, Jimmy Pike, in Broome Regional Prison, where I was working as a psychologist. When he was released, in 1986, I went to live with him at his camp in the Great Sandy Desert. Jimmy was an artist, and in the desert he continued painting. I, meanwhile, was a neophyte, learning new things every day, including the vocabulary of Jimmy's language, Walmajarri. I kept notebooks. I wrote down Walmajarri words and sent some of them to a linguist friend of mine, Joyce Hudson, who had been working for years on the Walmajarri dictionary. It was Joyce who suggested I write a book.

My first book was *Jilji — Life in the Great Sandy Desert*, published in 1990. To my surprise, this one book didn't fully satisfy my desire to publish, and I have been writing the same book more or less ever since. There is the desert trilogy: *Yinti, desert child*, *Desert Dog* and *Desert Cowboy*. The title of my latest, *In the Desert — Jimmy Pike as a Boy*, speaks for itself.

I did branch out and write a natural history book about Boab Trees. Having found that no one else had written one, and having tried to interest someone else in doing so, I was finally persuaded to write one myself. *The Boab Tree* was published by Lothian Books in 1998 and remaindered a couple of years later, but the Kimberley Bookshop bought most of the stock. The book continued to sell slowly but surely and is no longer available. I have had orders for it from Queensland, the UK, the US, India and even Canada. I like to think of it having a small but discerning readership.

Writing in the Kimberley is probably not much different from writing anywhere else, except that the advantages and disadvantages are reversed: we have plenty of subject-matter on our doorstep and don't have to go away to look for it, but our access to workshops, conferences, writers' festivals and other writers is restricted. At different times I and some friends have formed small writers' groups, which have been useful in keeping some of us writing.

In the mid-1990s, the West Kimberley was under threat from a single developer who wanted to dam the Fitzroy River and grow 225,000 hectares of irrigated cotton. I and two friends got together and founded Environs Kimberley, which has gone on to become the peak environmental organization in the region with about 350 members. At present we have one full-time and three part-time staff members. With the Fitzroy River safe for the time being, our present all-consuming concern is the industrialization of the Kimberley coast.

In 2005, three friends, two of us semi-retired, decided to start a publishing house in Broome. We claimed to be filling a gap in publishing, specialising in books written in the Kimberley. We called it, aptly, Backroom Press, and our rather grand motto is: 'From the Kimberley to the World'. Our first two publications were stories two of us had written ourselves. However, the next one, *Looking for Bobby*, a children's picture book about Broome, we chose from several submitted to us — it's surprising how quickly word gets round about a local 'publishing house' — and, somewhat to our chagrin, it is selling rather better than the first two. We still have a lot to learn.

Our next book is altogether more ambitious: we have edited an anthropologist's Ph.D. thesis about Aboriginal people's relationship with Argyle Diamond Mine. We chose to do this one because we think the story important, not only for Argyle but for other mining companies wanting to do business on Aboriginal land. However, because the readership is so specialised, the print run will be small, which means high costs per copy. So, more business-like than we have been in the past, we have decided only to publish if and when we have enough firm orders to cover our costs. So far, we have received over 100 orders, mainly from Argyle.

Another writing-related interest of mine, not to say obsession, is editing. No one seems to know how to write a grammatical sentence any more, and I edit everything; I even edit Radio National and my friends' conversations. However, while I shout at the radio, I usually keep my thoughts about my friends' ungrammatical utterances to myself, in order to keep my friends. I have sometimes taken on large editing jobs but I prefer the editing I do for Environs Kimberley's newsletter. The articles are about 500 words apiece, and the newsletter only comes out every three months. Although I do say it myself, we have reasonably high standards, and I worry about who is going to keep them up when I go gaga or drop off my perch. I have long nurtured a fantasy of producing a series of workshops about writing good English, and maybe turning the series into a book. There are dozens of books about writing, but one written primarily for people in the Kimberley would be a first.