

Prolific author Di Morrissey, who grew up on Pittwater's foreshore, has always made a point of keeping things "real".

Story by Rosamund Burton

Dinky Di

Life Stories



Pittwater is the setting for Di Morrissey's 29th and latest book, *The Night Tide*. Usually, she says the place for her next book chooses her, but because COVID-19 has restricted travel she decided on a place significant to her.

Di was five years old when her mother told her that they were moving to "a really special place, which we get to by boat".

"I was fully prepared for a May Gibbs life, which it was. There were possums and wallabies." Her mother, Kay, and stepfather, Bill Roberts, had a fibro shack in Lovett Bay.

"There was no electricity, so we had kerosene lanterns, the radio ran off the car battery, Mum had a wood-burning stove and a primus, and the fridge ran on kerosene," Di recounts.

I am talking to this great Australian author at the Langham Hotel in the Sydney CBD. She is 76, immaculately turned out, exuding energy, enthusiasm and looking years younger.

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Her parents didn't have much money, and her stepfather ran a water taxi service. From the age of seven Di had a little wooden dinghy.

"I used to row around all the bays, throw the anchor over and go fishing. I remember catching a very big flounder once."

One summer she overheard her parents talking about clearing the land around the house due to the threat of bushfires, and her stepfather saying that Dorothea Mackellar didn't want anyone to cut the bracken around her house. When she asked who they were talking about her mother told that there was an old lady, who could be a witch down the bottom of the bay, and that Di was not to go down there.

"That was a red rag to a bull. I did go down. The house looked deserted and the bracken was high. I was nosing around and she came out. 'What do you think you're doing?' she said imperiously. Quick as a flash I said, 'I'm looking for

fairies.'

'How splendid. I'll help you,' she replied and started lifting up the bracken with her walking stick."

When invited inside for a glass of milk Di was gob smacked to see an entire wall of books.

"I only get a book at Christmas and for my birthday," she told the famous poet, "so I make up my own stories."

"When you grow up you should write them in a book for other people to read," Dorothea Mackellar said.

Also, living in Lovett Bay was the actor Chips Rafferty, who taught Di rude limericks.

"When I recited one to my mother she nearly fainted, and told me not repeat anything Chips taught me, unless it was a poem printed in a book." He also regaled her with stories of his life as a stockman and spinning yarns around campfires at night. "So whatever you do, make sure it's Australian," he told young Di.

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Another resident of Lovett Bay, Mary Stackhouse, lent her books guiding her reading, as Di used to deliver the Stackhouses' newspaper and mail every afternoon, when she took the ferry back from Church Point after school.

But this idyllic existence ended just before Di's tenth birthday. Her 18-month-old half-brother, Michael, fell off her stepfather's boat. Bill dived in to save him, and both father and son drowned.

Di's biological father had left soon after she was born, her mother never spoke of him, and Bill Roberts was the only father she had known. She remembers her mother's pain and anguish, as she had no money and didn't know what to do. Chips Rafferty organised a fundraiser for them, and that enabled them to travel by ship to San Francisco to Kay's sister. They were there about 14 months and Kay

trained in film and television, and went on to have a very successful career as a director back in Australia.

"Mum got a war service loan and bought a little fibro house in Golf Avenue, Mona Vale. But emotionally she was very damaged," Di said. "She had no social life. At weekends we cleaned, did the gardening and read books, and I would be hanging out to go to the beach with my girlfriends. But Mum was a great role model. I believed I could do whatever I wanted."

After school Di got a job as a copy girl on *Australian Women's Weekly* then gained a journalist cadetship. As soon as she graduated she moved to London. She married Peter Morrissey, an American diplomat, and remembers at her wedding Chips saying: "What have I always told you?"

"Make it Australian," she murmured

from under her veil.

"Don't get conned by all of them over there," he said, "It's not what it always looks. Come back to the real place."

Through the 1970s Peter and Di Morrissey lived in Washington, Thailand, Japan, Indonesia and Guyana and had two children, Gabrielle and Nicolas. Di continued writing for magazines and newspapers and worked in radio.

But Chips and Dorothea Mackellar's words had never left her; she felt she had to return to Australia and follow her dream of being a writer. The children stayed at the embassy school with their father, and Di and the kids "to-ed and fro-ed during the year between Avalon and Djakarta".

Australia's first breakfast television program - *Good Morning Australia* - was launching, and she was taken on as one

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Di and partner Boris at Government House when Di was presented with her AM Medal; with stepfather Bill aged 7; on the set of *Good Morning Australia* in the early 1980s; with Gabrielle; plenty of flowers while working; on the wharf at Lovett Bay; living offshore, aged 10; Di the young reporter.



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of the presenters. But her long hours and 3am starts left no time for writing, so after eight years on the program she quit.

“I decided that if I didn’t have a bash I would never know if I could write a book.”

Anita Jacoby [whose Life Story was in the July 2022 issue of *Pittwater Life*] and Di became friends while both working on *Good Morning Australia*, and Di rented Anita’s family holiday house in Avalon. And, having trouble adapting from working full-time, she was taken under the wing of the Hermans, who invited her to come and write every day in the studio of their sandstone home on Chisholm Avenue. “I arrived every morning at 9 o’clock and sat in the studio, with Sali and Ted painting and me writing.”

Her first book, *Heart of the Dreaming*, inspired by a reporting trip she’d made to Longreach with RM Williams, was published in 1991, and a bestseller. Since then she has written a book every year, including four set around Broome in WA, except when her mother died. Last year plans went awry because of COVID-19 plus she had a melanoma removed from her cheek. It is hard to believe that half her face was cut, as there is no sign of a scar, and her skin looks perfect.

The Night Tide captures the magic

of Pittwater and also its strong close community. It is as if memories from Di’s early life have woven themselves into the story. The main thread of the novel is the mysterious disappearance of a loving husband and father 25 years earlier, and the pain of that loss which has affected his family.

I imagine the free-spirited 15-year-old, Cee-Cee, is probably not dissimilar to Di in her youth, but she says: “If I’m anyone I’m Dominic, sitting there wanting to write.” (Dominic Cochrane is the main character, who has just left a 20-year political staffer career, and has moved into a friend’s converted boatshed to write a book.)

The Night Tide has place names such as Welsh Island, The Point and Crouching Island. “It’s a bit of fun for them what know it,” Di says, “and the old stories are thinly disguised.” There’s an old man called Snowy who lives in a shack in the bush, who existed in Di’s youth, and Chips Rafferty and Dorothea Mackellar are also thinly disguised characters.

Having established her own disciplined routine with the help of the Hermans, in the early 1990s Di moved to Byron Bay. She rented a wooden shack on five acres within walking distance of town, where she stayed for nine years and wrote nine books. Then she re-met Boris Janjic, a cinematographer who worked with her mum Kay, and they have been together

for more than 20 years.

The couple left Byron Bay after Kay died, and moved to Wingham on the Manning River, where Di was born. Not only does Di write and research a 130,000-plus page novel every year, she is also passionate about raising awareness of important local issues, including inappropriate housing development. So since 2015 she has single-handedly written and published a monthly community newspaper, *The Manning Community News*.

In 2011 she established a school in Myanmar, which she continues to support, and she is also passionate environmentalist. With book sales of over three million, 28 bestsellers and five children’s books, in 2019 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in recognition of her “significant service to literature as a novelist, and to conservation and the environment”.

Di admits that reflecting on her childhood in Pittwater while writing *The Night Tide* “was a difficult sentimental journey”. But it is poignant that she has, after so long, revisited the place and the people, who inspired her to become the incredibly successfully Australian author she is.

****The Night Tide* by Di Morrissey is published by Pan MacMillan; RRP \$39.99 (hardback).**

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