

Ready to leave her own mark

Having gained experience teaming with famous author dad Thomas, Meg Keneally is now ready to fly solo as a storyteller.

Story by Rosamund Burton

With the publication in March of *The Ink Stain* – the fourth book in the Monsarrat series of whodunits set in penal stations she has co-authored with her renowned father, Tom Keneally – and her first solo novel, *Fled*, in April, 52-year-old Meg Keneally is realising a long-held dream.

"I've always been a scribbler," she admits. "I've got piles of notebooks, in which I've written my thoughts, or dashed off paragraphs, that make no sense to anyone but me." In her early 20s she worked as a journalist for *The Irish Times* in Dublin, and on returning to Sydney for *The Daily Telegraph*, before a stint in production at 2UE Radio, and starting her own public relations company focusing on financial services.

She sold that when got pregnant with her son, Rory, now 19, and the same year decided to write a novel.

"I received feedback that it needed more work, so I put it away. I wrote a second novel a year later and put that aside too. I thought I've given this a go, it hasn't worked out, but at least I won't die wondering, and it's time to move on."

Meg and her husband Craig had their second child, daughter Alex, and juggling two children and a corporate role took all her time.

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Then in 2014 her father approached her with the idea of co-writing a series of books about a gentleman convict, Hugh Monsarrat, who goes from penal station to penal station solving murders with his Irish housekeeper, Mrs Mulrooney. Tom, having had the idea for 10 years, and written 30,000 words of a first draft, suggested they write it together.

Their agent liked the story, but after reading a couple of chapters said that the familiar and dominant voice of Booker Prize winner, Tom Keneally, and the tentative new voice of his daughter were confusing. It was suggested that, taking the key aspects of the characters and the story, Meg re-write the first draft from scratch, before Tom and she worked on it together. The result was *The Soldier's Curse*, set in Port Macquarie. This was followed by *The Unmourned*, centring around the Female Factory in Parramatta, where Meg's maternal great-great grandmother had been interned; *The Power Game*, based on Maria Island, before *The Ink Stain*, focusing on press freedom and corruption in the Sydney office of the NSW Governor.

"It's been like a masterclass working with Dad on these," says Meg. "He makes suggestions, which to him seem simple,

but make all the difference. He's taught me to 'look under the bonnet' of a book and see the mechanical elements, which are pushing the story forward and fleshing out the characters."

Until Tom and Judy Keneally moved to Manly 10 years ago they lived in Bilgola, and prior to that Clareville where they moved to when Meg was six years old. Apart from several years in America, Meg and her younger sister Jane grew up in Pittwater. Meg went to Avalon Primary and Barrenjoey High, then attended St Luke's Grammar School at Dee Why.

Her childhood memories include being taught to fish by her grandfather at The Basin, and because their Clareville house backed onto bushland, regular visits to their backyard by koalas, possums... and snakes.

Her parents were friends with Jervis and Bridget Sparks, who lived in the Keeper's Cottage on Barrenjoey Headland, and every Easter the Keneally family used to visit.

"The cottage had no running water, or electricity, but it was a magical place to me, full of nooks and crannies. We stayed there a few times, and Jane and I would lie in our sleeping bags on a board attached to chains, like on a ship."

When Meg was about seven years old

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the Keneallys travelled around America in a van for six months. It was then Tom told Meg the story of Mary Bryant, the Cornish highway woman and First Fleet convict, who was the only female to successfully escape the colony, sailing 5,000 kilometres in an open boat with her two young children, husband and several other men from Sydney to Timor.

While researching for *The Soldier's Curse* Meg and Tom were sitting in a riverside pub in Port Macquarie, having a glass of wine, and Tom said with a wink: "Someone should write a book about Mary Bryant." Remembering the story from her childhood Meg researched it.

"It just took hold of me, and wouldn't leave me alone." The result is her beautifully written page-turning novel about Jenny Trelawney, based on the extraordinary life of Mary Bryant.

"It feels very different being a solo novel," says Meg. "Both in an exciting way and also in a slightly nervous-making way. You feel quite exposed when it's out there for everyone to judge, but I'm very proud of it."

Equally proud is her father who over

many years has not only recognised his daughter's desire to be a writer, but also her potential. He described it as "a great privilege and an exceptional experience" when he launched the book at Lindfield Books, sporting a straw hat with a homemade *Fled* band.

"You have carried this child around on your shoulders, seen her fall, taken her to children's concerts and circuses, and it's so extraordinary to find a serious novelist emerging from all that."

Meg has an incredible work ethic. Six days a week, after only four or five hours' sleep, she rises at 2am, and does corporate consulting work until 7 o'clock, followed by breakfast with the family before they head their respective ways, and some form of exercise – the gym, a walk, or occasionally a dive. Meg used to be a part-time SCUBA diving instructor, but due to her writing commitments has given this up. However, whenever she has a free moment she leaves her home in North Balgowlah to submerge herself in Manly's aquatic reserve at Cabbage Tree Bay.

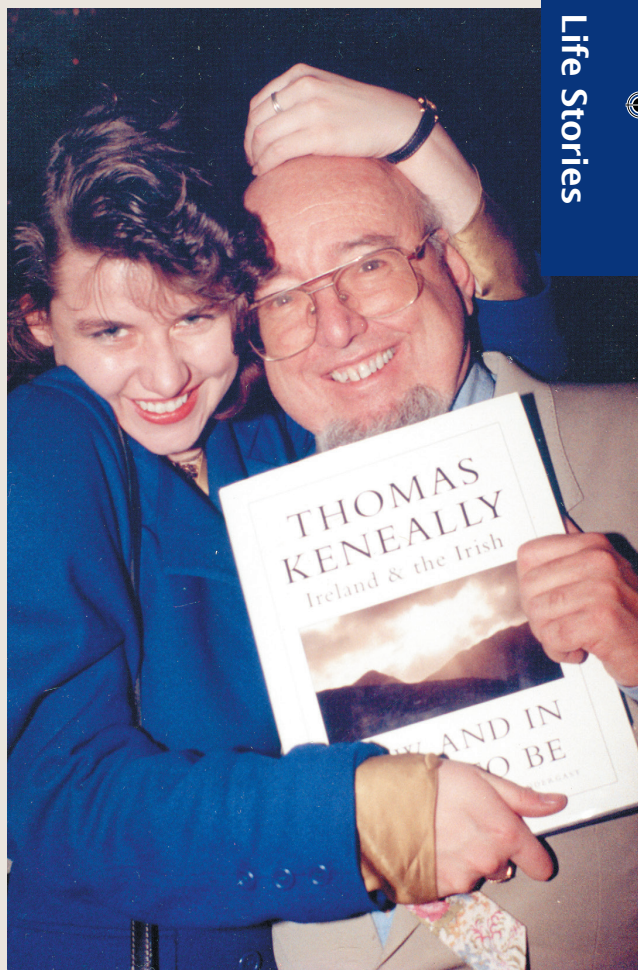
Every day from 10.30am to 3.30pm she sits down to write, and during the

first draft stage puts down a staggering 4,000 words a day, which impresses even the prolific writer, Keneally senior.

Meg admits it hasn't been an easy journey. She has written in total three novels, which she says will never be published, because they're not good enough. She philosophically regards those as her "practice runs", although is painfully aware of the numerous hours she spent on them.

But, now, she's well and truly in her stride. *Fled* has been optioned for film and she's written the screenplay. Also, she's nearly finished writing her next book, *The Wreck*, based on the Dunbar shipwreck off Sydney Heads, and a modern-day female archaeologist obsessed with its sole survivor. Whether co-written with Tom, or alone, Meg Keneally's captivating reads are finding their way onto bookshelves in both Australia and overseas.

* *Fled* by Meg Keneally is published by Echo (RRP \$29.99); *The Ink Stain* by Meg and Tom Keneally is published by Penguin Random House Australia (RRP \$32.99). Meg Keneally is speaking at the Sydney Writers Festival (29 April – 5 May); more info swf.org.au



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Meg Keneally at home with the four books she co-authored with her father Thomas, plus her breakout novel *Fled*; watching lovingly as Tom takes the pedestal to launch *Fled*; on her father's shoulders in the 1970s; helping dad on the promo trail; the Keneallys 'walking on water'; introducing son Rory to Bilgola pool in 2000.

