



Write of passage

Clareville's Joanna Nell tells of her journey from respected local GP to widely read, successful author.

Story by *Rosamund Burton*

At the front door of bestselling author and GP Joanna Nell's home in Clareville, I'm greeted by her black Labrador Margo, who the writer tells me is her muse.

Later, sitting at her kitchen table drinking tea, the 54-year-old tells me she wanted to be a doctor from the age of eight. She is originally from Bromsgrove, a small market town in the UK's Worcestershire. Her mother was a hairdresser, and her father ran a small electrical shop, which her grandfather opened in 1922, recharging early crystal wireless sets, and which her brother runs today.

"I grew up in a house full of televisions, and had a fascination with medical programs like Emergency Ward 10 and Angels. When a teacher asked our class what we wanted to be when we grew up

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I said I wanted to be a doctor. This was 1974. She told me that I was probably better to set my sights on something else instead, as medicine was a career for a boy, which made me all the more determined to go on and study it."

Aged 13, Joanna won a scholarship to a boys' boarding school. She hadn't fitted in at the local primary school, having been bullied because she was bookish. She believes this new school changed her life as she was encouraged to follow an academic path.

"My parents were a little bit surprised when one of my teachers said that I could go to university," she says in an understated English way, adding that she was first person in her family to go university. And she went to Britain's top universities: first Cambridge for three years, and then to Oxford.

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She reflects that English was her favourite subject at school and the two prizes she won at medical school were both for creative writing – a piece on her student attachment to a practice in a tiny rural village in Devon; and an essay about, as a medical student, finding herself in charge of the chaotic maternity ward in a remote African hospital, when all the midwives went off to tea.

After finishing her GP training, even though she was told it would be career suicide, she took a job as a ship's doctor, working for a couple of years with P&O.

"I loved it and that's how I met my husband John who was an engineer on the same ship."

Having decided to get married, John took a shore job and Joanna went back to general practice. They had just finished renovating their house in the New Forest

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and had a young baby and toddler, when John was asked to move to Sydney for work. Being very close to her family, Joanna thought it wasn't sensible to move across the world. But stuck indoors during a wet February with a frustrated toddler and a crying baby made her dream of a new adventure and blue skies, and she agreed to come here for a year.

The couple drove up to Palm Beach and fell in love with Clareville.

"When I got here I really felt at home and decided to make our home on the Northern Beaches. That was 2003 and we haven't moved from Clareville." Joanna's daughter Charlotte is now in her final year at St Luke's Grammar School; as we chat she is secreted away in another corner of the house revising for her HSC. Joanna's son William is in the UK studying marine

engineering.

Joanna shows me her writing den. On her desk - a large wooden table - sits her laptop and beside it pages of the manuscript she's currently writing. On a table beside the sofa there is a stack of her latest book, *The Great Escape from Woodlands Nursing Home*, Joanna Nell's poignant but highly entertaining third novel. Beautifully crafted, the story of elderly inmates - spinster Hattie Bloom and widower Walter Clements on his mobility scooter (known as 'the Tesla') - determined to help a dying friend, and reverse key staff member Sister Bronwyn's dismissal had me laughing out loud and reading late into the night.

"From when I did my first writing course to publishing my first book was six years," Joanna tells me, "which is exactly

the same amount of time it took me to qualify as a doctor."

Despite loving writing stories from an early age, Joanna was working full-time and had two children so was too busy to even dream about writing. But a ten-pin bowling evening for the parents at her son's new school changed that.

"I was keen to be a cool mum, so despite never having done ten-pin bowling before, went at it with gusto, but a little too much gusto, because I did the splits on my first bowl." She tore her hamstrings and was taken to the Emergency Department at Mona Vale Hospital, where she worked for 10 years. She had to have surgery, then lie on her back at home recuperating for six weeks.

Thoroughly bored, Joanna started

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: With the children in 2005; ship's doctor in 1995; Cambridge graduation 1988; first Xmas Day in Australia (2003); in nurse's uniform with cousin James (1970); Joanna's father's favourite photo of her (1968).



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 thinking about creative writing and found the Australian Writer's Centre online courses.

"I did my first course in 2012 and absolutely loved it." She started writing short stories, and coincidentally, noticed that all the characters she created were older people.

"I meet many older people, who've had the most extraordinary lives. Their worldly experience, wisdom and wit inspires me to create interesting fictional characters."

At an Australian Society of Authors event she met a literary agent, and when Joanna sent her the manuscript for her first book, *The Single Ladies of Jacaranda Retirement Village*, she read it overnight. Within a couple of days she had interest in it from three publishers.

"I got an amazing offer - a two-book deal with Hachette."

That book was published in 2018, and for Joanna it was a life-long dream come

true; however, with that came a crisis of identity and confidence.

"I just could not combine full-time general practice with writing another book in a year," she admits, "So I made the heartbreaking choice to walk away from my practice. The reality was, I couldn't be the kind of GP I wanted to be, and neither could I give up on my lifelong dream of being an author."

For her second book, she gave herself to writing full-time. Drawing on her experience of working on a cruise ship she wrote *The Last Voyage of Mrs Henry Parker*, which was published in 2019. But Joanna really missed her work as a doctor. Fortunately, she has now been able to combine both her dreams and is working two days a week in a local practice, and writing the other three.

Talking about *The Great Escape from Woodlands Nursing Home*, Joanna says she wanted to show the human side of aged care.

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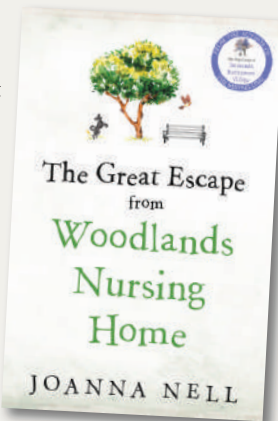
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"I wanted to show that people don't change just because they live in an aged care facility, because they have become frail, or need extra help with their health needs." She hopes that this book will create discussion about "what our choices are when we age, and what we expect from aged care".

One issue, which forms the backbone of the novel, is that many residents in aged care facilities don't sleep through the night; with her Labrador Queenie, Sister Bronwyn, a dedicated carer with great ingenuity and a healthy disregard for protocol, runs the clandestine Night Owls club.

Joanna explains that the character of 89-year-old ornithologist Hattie Bloom was inspired by a small sandstone cottage nearby, which for years



was overgrown and neglected.

"I imagined there was a reclusive woman living in the cottage who preferred the company of birds to people." The author admits she is "a complete bird nut" herself, a passion she shares with her father.

As she writes her fourth novel and also works part-time as a GP, Joanna believes that being a doctor makes her a better writer, and being a writer makes her a better doctor.

"They're complementary. They use different sides of the brain, a creative side and a logical side, but what they have in common is a real interest in people."

* *The Great Escape from Woodlands Nursing Home*; RRP \$32.99, Ebook \$14.99.

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