

Acclaimed author/playwright and Avalon local Julie Janson recounts the experiences that helped shape her creative journey.

Story by Rosamund Burton

Life Stories

Matter of perspective

Writer Julie Janson and I sit on the balcony of her home in Avalon, eyed by a sulphur-crested cockatoo perched on the balustrade.

Due to the pandemic, after five years of research and writing, there was no launch, no author talks nor book signings when her latest book the historical novel, *Benevolence*, was published on 1 May.

"I did nothing," she says. "I watched another program about COVID-19 and cried. I feel such compassion for the people who are suffering."

In March, she and husband Michael were in England visiting their son, Byron, who is doing a master of public policy at Oxford University.

"We'd only been there three days and we had to come home, and were on one of the last planes back to Australia." Then she throws back her head and adds with a laugh: "The girl who grew up gathering oysters in a hessian bag on the Lane Cove River has a son at Oxford!"

Julie's mother was of English theatre stock, but it's her father's Aboriginal ancestry which has always intrigued her. Her dad was an amazing bushman and

she remembers him with an axe in the back of his shorts shimmying up trees. Julie and her two brothers used to walk barefoot with him along the mudflats at sunset, collecting oysters.

"And in our leaky old boat we'd row alongside St Ignatius College Riverview and drop our homemade crab traps, while the eights rowed past with the coxes calling 'stroke, stroke, stroke.'" After more than 30 years of marriage it's still a joke between Michael and her that he was one of those Riverview boys.

As a child Julie remembers one of her father's uncles calling her a "little white blackfella", But, she says, in the 1950s and 60s people in Sydney didn't mention their Indigenous blood.

"Especially if, like us, you were descended from Aboriginal and convict stock. It was called 'double stain, double shame'."

After Hunters Hill High School, she went to the University of NSW and studied drama. Then when she was only 18 her dad was killed in a car crash, which she describes as "cataclysmic".

At the end of her third year she had

a 'love child' with West Australian actor George Shevtsov. Unable to support herself and her baby she couldn't complete her honours degree, so went with her son, Morgan, to Bourke in western NSW for a year to work on an Aboriginal housing project.

"I spent my time down at the Aboriginal reserve and all the women taught me so much, but the racism in the town - it was 1972 - was unbelievable. Because I was going to the reserve, white people would chuck rocks as I walked down the street."

She went back to the University of NSW to do teacher training, and then applied to work at a small Aboriginal school in the Northern Territory. It was a two-teacher school and when she asked if her boyfriend, who was also a teacher, could accompany her, was told not unless they were married. They had only been going out for three months, but went to a registry office and tied the knot.

The school had 52 children aged from 4 to 18, none of whom could read or write, so it required the teachers' skill and ingenuity. Being a drama teacher, Julie created

acting scenarios for the children, playing shopkeepers and customers, to teach them mathematics and English.

The school was on a remote cattle station and the manager used to set his dogs on the Aboriginal children if they came too close to his fence, so the young teachers chose to spend their spare time with the 300 Aboriginal people on the reserve. Julie was adopted into the tribe and a corroboree was performed for them with a hundred men and women painted up and in full regalia doing a four-hour ceremony.

"It was an unbelievable," Julie says. She lived in NT Aboriginal communities for three years, during which time she had another child, her daughter Zoe, and this experience was the basis for her first novel, *The Crocodile Hotel*.

Julie Janson is a natural raconteur and regales me with stories of her time teaching in Galiwinku, an island off Arnhem Land, including when a school play she produced, in which students dressed as skeletons, had the 400-strong audience screaming and running out, in the belief they were being haunted by the spirits of the dead.

"That's when I thought there was a possibility for me to have a future in theatre," she adds.

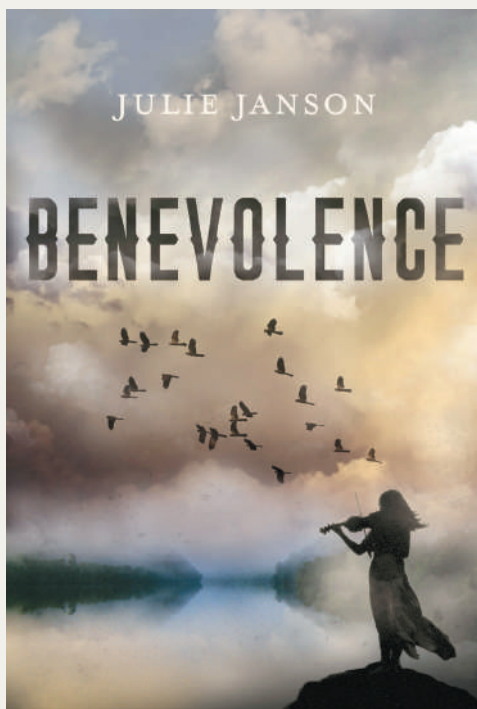
She was working on an Aboriginal program at the University of Sydney when she wrote her first play, 'Gunjies', developed from improvisations with her students, about a debutante ball and a black death in custody. Her play, 'Black Mary', about the Aboriginal bushranger Mary Ann whose partner was Captain Thunder-

bolt, was first performed by Belvoir Street Theatre at Carriageworks in 1997. The NSW Premier attended the opening night, and the six-week run of the impressive production completely sold out. But 10 days in, the seating collapsed and the play was cancelled.

Michael and Julie have lived in their Avalon house for their entire married life, their son Byron was born there and they raised their three children in the area.

"I love this area and I love knowing the Aboriginal history. The Hawkesbury River is my country." Julie is a Burru-berongal woman of the Darug Nation and her latest novel, *Benevolence*, is based on the story of her great-great-grandmother Mary Thomas, who was born at Freeman's Reach, near Windsor.

Continued on page 40



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Julie in peaceful surrounds at home in Avalon; her new book; Julie (on left) with school friends in 1967; her father Neville in 1950; with her family, camping in Pittwater in 1967; with baby son Morgan in 1971.





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ABOVE: A beach get-together with family (grandson Carl, son Byron, son Morgan, husband Michael and grandson Lewis. RIGHT: Julie and George (father of Morgan) in 1970.



For five years she was a researcher for the University of Sydney's History of Aboriginal Sydney website, and during that time interviewed elders about their families' stories.

"Many of the stories were similar to those of my own family. They filled in the details of a generic story of how the Darug people survived on the Hawkesbury after invasion." Integral to her research has been the 'blanket lists', which compiled by government officials, named the men, women and children and their clans, who collected a blanket each year.

Benevolence, set between 1817 and 1843, is a heart-wrenching novel about a young Aboriginal girl, Muraging (also named Mary), who is sent to the Parramatta Native Institution, and then caught between the black and white worlds.

The book finishes with her at Palm Beach, where her cousin, the historical figure Bowen Bungaree (and son of Bungaree who circumnavigated Australia with Matthew Flinders), was a tracker, protecting the white settlers from bushrangers, until he was murdered on Newport's Bushranger Hill.

"My great aunt Louisa Bartle (née Lewis) was a granddaughter of Chief Bungaree and Queen Matora," she revealed.

Julie is a member of the Budawa Aboriginal Signage group working with Northern Beaches Council on Aboriginal signage for the area. (She adds wryly that Bowen Bungaree actually lived at Governor Phillip

Park, while the governor only visited for two days.)

As Julie Janson talks I realise what a remarkable woman this 70-year-old is. After the 2004 tsunami she worked as a volunteer for two months on a relief boat, delivering food and medical supplies, and setting up schools along the Aceh coast in Indonesia. She has been the recipient of numerous writing fellowships and awards, including in 2018 the prestigious Judith Wright Poetry Prize for her powerful poem, 'Acacia Land'.

Julie Janson's life-long quest to learn more about her Aboriginal heritage, combined with her gifts as a storyteller and teacher, provide in *Benevolence* a vivid picture from an Indigenous perspective of the devastating effect of white settlement, but also the many incidences of resilience, adaptation and survival. *Benevolence* certainly has deepened my understanding of what happened to Aboriginal people on the Hawkesbury, and its publication couldn't be timelier.