

The May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust Fellowships

While I was visiting Adelaide in Book Week 2003, a Melbourne friend, author Errol Broome, invited me to afternoon tea at the charming apartment in which she was staying. There were five children's authors enjoying each other's company, when one of us asked: 'What do you mean, this is the May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust studio?' On my return home, I went on-line and discovered that the Trust also has studios in Melbourne and Canberra. There is now a fourth one in Brisbane. To honour May Gibbs's contribution to Australian children's literature, the Trust offers rent-free residencies and travel assistance to Australian children's authors and illustrators who feel they would benefit from one month's creative time away from home to pursue their passion.

My choice of studio was obvious: I live in Melbourne, often visit Adelaide schools, but had never done an author tour of Canberra. It was only when my application for a fellowship at the Canberra studio was accepted that reality struck: I have a husband and three sons. I travel interstate for work on average ten weeks a year, but this would be the first time in about thirty years that I'd be living alone for an extended period! In some ways that was slightly daunting, but to be honest the prospect of my very own garret for a whole month was exhilarating. Any doubts that I harboured vanished completely when Virginia West met me at Canberra airport. Virginia initiated the Trust's purchase of the studio apartment in Campbell and she's its very creative caretaker. The studio is small, but adequate - it's on the top floor of a three-storey block (a penthouse really!) with a lounge/dining/bedroom plus kitchen which all face northeast, so it's constantly flooded with sunlight through its huge picture windows. I loved the view, overlooking treetops towards Mt Ainslie. Virginia's guided tour around the local area showed me that the studio is close to parklands and Lake Burley Griffin, so daily walks would be compulsory. I knew I'd miss my family, but once Virginia left me as custodian of the studio's large brass door key, it really didn't take long to switch into garret mode.

The studio has a phone for local and in-coming calls, and an Internet connection for the laptop, so I spoke to my family either by phone or on-line most days, but I felt happily removed from the domestic dramas at home. I could keep writing without worrying what time it was, who had to go where, what I'd cook for dinner, who'd be there to eat it and when, what had to be washed and ironed, what was needed from the supermarket. It was weird, but totally wonderful. Shopping was minimal and spontaneous: I could eat lamb cutlets and mash every night if I wanted to, or take myself to the local Chinese restaurant for prawns and rice noodles, or keep working while I nibbled fruit, cheese and chocolate! Bliss. My life was instantly simple and focused. Home life was relegated - my life as a writer consumed me!

My fellowship project was a junior fiction title for Lothian Books, *Who Dares?* which is a stand-alone novel that follows the award winning *Who Cares?*. I knew the characters and had planned the storyline, but, even so, I was amazed how easily the text flowed onto my laptop, uninterrupted by the usual household routine. I'd also been working on a picture book story idea for some months and so, to clarify the storyline and firm up the historic detail for *Lofty's Mission*, I spent many hours doing research at the Australian War Memorial. I handled archival files that contained original wartime letters and photos, and watched black and white film of the era. I was elated as the story fell into place. I felt more than inspired - I was energised by this fantastic opportunity to concentrate so completely on my writing. As a direct consequence of this experience, Lothian Books will publish *Lofty's Mission* in 2007.

My commitment to the May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust was that I would spend at least fifty percent of my time writing - and be available to do school visits (at ASA rates) as organised by Prue Clarke, who runs the Canberra studio committee. These generous volunteers are ex-principals of primary schools and dedicated to children's literature. Prue scheduled my visits to schools, then organised someone to take me and someone else to bring me home, usually via a delightful afternoon tea spot, like the legendary Tilly's Divine. And it was home; with many new friends just a phone-call away if I needed company! But interestingly, for someone who normally lives in the equivalent of a train station at peak hour, I enjoyed the solitude. Not having my own car was an absolute plus, keeping distraction to a minimum. My busiest time away from the studio was when I was writer-in-residence for a

fantastic week at Weetangera Primary School, and it was here that I unexpectedly met a talented young man whom I later introduced, via email, to Helen Chamberlin, my publisher at Lothian Books. My chance discovery that staff member Courtney Dom has a degree in graphic design meant that, at my instigation, Helen gave Courtney the opportunity to design the cover of *Who Dares?* The story is set against a background of surfing and skateboarding, and Courtney, a keen skater himself, has created an awesome cover.

During my weeks in Canberra I worked in several other schools, was taken to lunch by the effervescent Jackie French, went to the CBC Judge's talk given by Lynne Babbage, had an excellent meal with MGCLT and CBC committee members, caught up with my childhood friend, Jackie Lallemand, a celebrated Canberra potter, visited the Art Gallery and did a book signing session at, 4 Suitable Book in Kingston. The highlight of the book signing was six year old Rachel flinging the door open and declaring 'I'm here!' as though I'd been expecting her and knew exactly who she was — which I didn't! But she was the ultimate fan, coercing her dad and baby brother to visit the bookshop on Saturday morning to buy Sniffy the Sniffer Dog and get it signed — not to mention a photo with the author! Such infectious enthusiasm. Several months later a young girl in Brisbane recognised me in a restaurant, telling her mum that I was the 'famous author' who'd visited her school in Canberra! My fellowship has certainly raised my author profile in the ACT.

Another standout moment of my fellowship was having lunch with Dr Belle Alderman at the University of Canberra, followed by a visit to the Lu Rees Archives. I was thrilled that the Archives had a display of all my books, but I was honoured to hold in my hands the original correspondence between Walter McVitty and John Marsden, recounting John's reworking of a manuscript entitled *Diary*, which, with Walter's editorial help, he developed into *So Much to Tell You*. In 1987 I had been privileged to review this novel, John's first, on ABC Radio and I'd correctly predicted that it would win the CBC Book of the Year Award. I later learnt that mine was the first review the book had received and that John had been listening, amazed that someone other than his family actually liked his story! No wonder I felt so emotional while reading those archival letters in Canberra seventeen years later.

Sometimes in the past I've had fleeting moments of frustration when I've envied writers who didn't have a family. I'd wondered if living alone, or just with a partner, gave an author more freedom to write, but I'm now certain that, for me, without my family life I'd be writing very different stories. My fellowship at the May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust studio in Canberra in May 2004 gave me not just the space and time, but the permission to be self-indulgent as a writer, to be disciplined and to explore my potential, to concentrate on the hard work of writing, and to develop my craft. This was a unique experience - and it changed me. It gave me real time to discover myself as a writer, and although I have been published for fifteen years, with seventeen books to my credit, it's only now that I finally dare to believe in myself as an author. Thank you, May Gibbs for your continuing inspiration; thank you to the May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust, especially Ian Wilson and Nanette Halliday; and thank you to all those directly involved with the Trust's residential fellowships in Canberra, especially Prue Clarke and Virginia West. Magic happens.

You can find out more about the May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust fellowships on: www.maygibbs.org.au. Krista Bell won the 17th Australian Family Therapists' Award for Children's Literature in 2004 with her junior novel *Who Cares?* Check out Krista's homepage: www.kristabell.com