In Search of Alice Springs

By Glenn Morrison

"After receiving my advance I spent the first six months panicking, and thinking of giving it back."


Overview

Five writers commissioned to write about their home cities talked to Sally Heath at literary journal Meanjin in September 2011 about the process. The interviews included Falconer (quoted above) as well as Sophie Cunningham on Melbourne, Peter Timms on Hobart, Kerryn Goldsworthy on Adelaide, Matthew Condon on Brisbane and Paul Daley on Canberra. What these authors had to say was especially rewarding for me, as it has helped to shed light on my own challenges conducting research into writing about place, a project which takes as its focus the outback town of Alice Springs.

I had been fielding around for role models to help me write a literary non-fiction book about the town. In Australia these are few and far between, a literature of place here being in its infancy. But the innovative UNSW Press series — asking prominent authors to write about their hometowns — gave some clues. What I was proposing I realised, was a city narrative for a regional town. It would be a meditation on place with a strong narrative flow; an exploration of the notion of home, and the sense of belonging my family and I had found during more than a decade living at Alice Springs, the last place any of us would have expected to find it.

Using research by creative practice, I wanted to give readers a taste of life in the remote settlement that was once celebrated as Australia's Outback Capital, yet soon after dubbed by media "the stabbing capital of the globe". The work would capture not only the town's challenges — which are considerable — but the reasons why so many have fallen in love with it. Perhaps also, it might help to begin unravelling the postcolonial entanglement dogging the town's population, an issue that has placed the outpost squarely at the epicentre of the nation's angst about a future for its remarkably resilient indigenous population.

In 2010, I had written a personal essay beginning this process. I had wanted to start shaping my thoughts after finishing eight years at the town's principal newspaper The Centralian Advocate, first as a reporter, finally as editor. The essay won the Charles Darwin University Essay prize at the 2010 Northern Territory Literary Awards,
which encouraged me to make enquiries about starting the project as a PhD through the Media Department at Macquarie University.

My vision was for an exploration of the town's role in the Australian imagination, as well as the more personal investigation of home and belonging, an element so evidently pivotal from my lived experience of Alice Springs. I wanted to write a memoir component, with a strong personal narrative at its core, one that featured the physical environment, which looms so large in residents' experience of the place. I began to read the nature writers to see what this would offer, and this resonated with my background in the physical and earth sciences. Around the memoir I would wind some of my experiences and observations as a journalist and draw on the town's well-documented history, use snippets of published stories from residents past and present, as well as mine a considerable non-fiction literature and media of Central Australia.

Research challenges

The first challenge in writing a city or a town, as Matthew Condon muses in his interview with Meanjin's Sally Heath is: "How do you embrace — in a work of literary non-fiction — something as fluid and organic as a city" (2011). Or indeed Matthew, a regional capital? Especially one as prominent in media and as controversial and diverse as the town of Alice Springs?

Many have written of its beauty, yet Central Australia is a land of opposites, its rugged and attractive landscape juxtaposed with widespread poverty and social dysfunction. It is at once celebrated in literature and slaughtered in the media, a town with its own peculiar brand of trouble — crime, public violence and drunkenness, terrible and abject poverty among its aboriginal population, all resulting, in some quarters now, in the distinct feeling that it is unsafe to walk the streets at night. Yet billions in government funding and decades of solutions continue to fail. A woman I know has at home a teetering pile of thick commonwealth government housing reports, one for each year and going back decades. Each report ‘discovers’, as if for the first time, that housing is a pressing issue in the Centre. Perhaps if we could construct houses from reports we might have the answer.

For more than half a century, Alice Springs has clung to a unique and cherished, yet largely unexamined position at the heart of Australian culture. Author Xavier Herbert once called Central Australia the stage on which the great themes of Australia are played out. In 1984 he came to Alice Springs to write a novel about the town, tentatively entitled Billy Goat Hill, after a topographic feature near the CBD. He never finished the work and died a short time later. Narratives set in or inspired by Alice Springs abound. Yet there is no definitive work of place regarding the region or its central hub the town itself. I wanted to write it . . . but how?
From early on in my research, walking emerged as one important component of what was always going to be a multi-pronged methodology. An unexpected challenge was simply to set down as accurately and as free of cultural affectation as possible, what was before my eyes; to "tell it like it is". More and more I am finding walking is helping me, not only to apprehend the sights, smells and sounds of Alice Springs, but also to achieve a more objective mindset, thanks to the enhanced awareness of objects and phenomena it brings, its clarity of observation and purpose.

The other major challenge has been narrative. I had originally proposed to drive the creative work using a personal narrative. Then, for a few months this year I became enamoured of the idea of using a straight walking narrative. I have done many extended walks in the past and fancied another. Such a walk would serve not only as narrative arc, but would bolster the contemplative aspects of the project, helping me to mull over the issues, enhance whatever creative capacity I might or might not be able to bring to bear. I even wrote a not inconsiderable volume toward the venture. Here, the opening lines . . .

The 223 kilometre long Larapinta Trail begins less than two kilometres from my front door. Call me lazy, but I do love the easy option. And sure, I gave serious consideration to starting my trek of the desert route from right there at my house. Imagine: I wave goodbye to my wife and daughter, shoulder my pack and be off, like some latter day Henry David Thoreau enjoying a 'tonic of wildness' in his beloved Massachusetts. I would only return, sore-footed but elated, after having conquered the hills and gorges of the Red Centre, which surround our abode on the outskirts of Alice Springs, Australia.

Or something like that!

But the straight walking project wasn't suiting me for a host of reasons. For one, I felt it was not going to deliver the serious treatment of the place I thought it deserved. And I was keen — in the tradition of nature writing — to let the place itself dictate the boundaries and tone, as far as was practicable. Perhaps I had read too much Bill Bryson (notably A Walk in the Woods), but the lighthearted tone I was naturally bringing to the walking narrative would, I felt, be disrespectful to the aims I had set. Although, such "serious" deliberations have been made in Bruce Chatwin's The Songlines, Robyn Davidson's Tracks — both essentially walking narratives — as well as in the more journey-oriented works Terra Nullius by Sven Lindqvist and No Road by Stephen Muecke. Personally, on the walk I feared becoming lost in the transcendental meanderings of nature writing and its undoubted attractions, something which, though delightful, would steer me askew of my purpose. Ultimately, I realised, I was welded on to my original vision for the project. So, I paused. I had a good think and several discussions with my supervisor Ian Collinson.

Progress
Now I am working on a project closer to my original conception. Yet, as I write, perhaps not strangely, I am finding the walking has stayed with me. Somehow, it is finding its own place alongside the memoir, history and journalism. Perhaps it is helping in the same way that Sophie Cunningham found her photographic skills helped her to capture Melbourne: "A way of being present and capturing a place as you find it" (Heath, 2011).

The difficulties and challenges persist. Many segments or scenes I would like to write as non-fiction or memoir have proven easier to write as fiction. One example is a recent short story called *The Pumpkin*, which draws on several real life experiences. Some of these experiences will likely appear separately in the non-fiction work. But *The Pumpkin* binds them together in a way that better serves the narrative and thematic purpose, and, in a shorter span, all impossible and unethical in a work of creative non-fiction. Also, I could mould and enhance the fictional character to suit my purposes, instead of being restricted to my own direct experience, or that of the literature. This helps conceal identities and establish a flow of narrative perhaps not otherwise possible. There are times, I believe, one can deliver a complex theme more simply in fiction than non-fiction. An extract follows this introduction.

Despite the fictional forays, the non-fiction project remains compelling and its challenges exciting. Anthropologist W.H Stanner in his essay *The Dreaming* described Indigenous notions of time; past, present and future interwoven into an ever-pulsing present he called "everywhen" (1953/2009). I found this notion irresistible. It made me more determined than ever to eschew a chronological narrative for the work. Also, it more accurately reflected how memory functions: snippets of childhood layered in no particular order onto pubescent angst and a challenging adulthood. Now, like Falconer, I have adopted a thematic structure for the work, rather than a chronological narrative per se. Each section (of perhaps five) will be self-contained and explore a facet of Alice Springs that I have gleaned from my lived experience, conversations and reading. Of *Sydney* Falconer says: "I had already decided that I would like to range over the entirety of Sydney's history, picking and choosing my stories, but that I also wanted to move in a loosely chronological order through some of my own memories" (Heath, 2011).

To date I have drafted an introduction and rough drafts of two chapters. I keep a journal, notes from my walks, and I am making steady headway into the region's literature. For now, I include here an extract from Chapter One of the literary non-fiction project, *In Search of Alice Springs* and an extract from *The Pumpkin*.

*Bibliography*


Muecke, S., 1997, *No Road: Bitumen All the Way*, (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press).

Extract One: In Search of Alice Spring

Chapter 1

Nomads

"I think I would be happy in that place I happen not to be . . . 

Charles Baudelaire Any Where Out of The World

"It was kind of lazy and jolly, laying off comfortable all day, smoking and fishing, and no books or study . . . I didn’t see how I’d ever got to like it so well at the widow’s, where you had to wash, and eat on a plate, and comb up, and go to bed and get up regular . . . I didn’t want to go back no more."

Mark Twain Huckleberry Finn

"Could it be . . . that our need for distraction, our mania for the new, was, in essence, an instinctive migratory urge akin to that of birds in autumn?"

Bruce Chatwin The Songlines

I

My earliest memory is of walking. I am with my father as we approach the intersection where, as a child, I undertook countless shopping errands; it could be any corner, drawn from any suburb in Sydney's southwest. But this is the suburb of Padstow Heights. I am about three years old — which would make it 1964 or thereabouts — and my father is holding my hand. In my mind, this intersection is the hub of all business transactions of my childhood, a leaving off point, the beginning of all adventures. There is Mister Stokel's Corner shop with its milkshakes bar and lolly counter, its Arnott's biscuits and enthralling rack of magazines. Opposite is Mister Mollica's fruit-o, his sons likely helping him rack the apples after school and him tea-towelling a shine on to the tomatoes. Further down a doctor, chemist, and a hardware where I once ran through breaking everything in sight made of glass, no doubt a terrible headache for my mother. These shops have all changed hands and many have altered their trade completely. Yet, in my minds eye, they are each just as they were all those years ago. Next to me is a cyclone wire fence. Behind it my entire view is commandeered by a concrete water tower many stories high with an alluring metal ladder up one side, all of which supplies drinking water to the surrounding suburbs still emerging from the Hawkesbury sandstone and sclerophyll bushland.

Around the corner, I know, is the bus stop, where three or four years later my father and I will take the number 24 bus to Bankstown every Thursday night for band practice. I will learn the tenor horn then the cornet in the Bankstown Municipal Brass Band. Go on to study engineering then quit to play music, take up writing. I'm guessing that this day my father and I have walked to the shops for the cigarettes that
will eventually kill him. Perhaps he has carried me some of the way. Before we turn left to Mister Stokel's I spy movement from the corner of my eye, on the opposite corner. A second look reveals the source: a rabbit. It scampers across a patch of bare ground on the cleared house block there, against a backdrop of remnant bush. I point, to draw my father's attention. What a splendid sight. I am filled with utter joy. It is one of the few fond memories I have of time spent with my father. Not many years after, I would become steadily more and more aware of his mental breakdowns, labelled by psychiatrists as paranoid schizophrenia. There are times I wonder how far they missed out on a correct diagnosis of this. Although none of this spoils my retained image of that ever so soft bunny and his still twitching rear end.

II

At the Alice Springs Botanical Gardens there is a shady area called the Mulga Woodland. It is not far from the spot where botanical illustrator and anthropologist Olive Pink set up a tent at the age of 72 and proceeded to live in it while she lobbied the Northern Territory Government to set up a flora reserve around her. The woodland is a part of Ms Pink's determined legacy – finally gazetted in 1956 – and one of my favourite spots in the town to aimlessly saunter, to sit, and to think. In the mornings, the needle-leafed mulgas provide a dappled light by which to read, and in an odd way their tough grey bark provides companionship while I write. Such trees are only dwarves really, by comparison to the eucalypts, of which there are more than a few nearby; mostly the thin, straight-backed countenance of the ghost gum with its alarming sense of nudity. But it is the gnarled shape of the mulga branches, spread radially like tired arms, which imparts in me a sense of relaxation. Perhaps it was this same sense which inspired the ranger (for there is only one) to place an armchair bench, once lacquered but now worn and faded, underneath the canopy of one of the mulgas. I walk toward the bench. The ground nearby is strewn with fallen mulga needles and desiccated gum leaves, and the whole ensemble gives a delicious crunch, thick to my ears and soft underfoot with each step as the humus slowly but surely decomposes and returns its goodness and nutrients to the sand below. And I sit. To write.

One or two early diners pull into the car park, a universe away, but in reality, only 50 metres. Café opens at ten. I'll meet friends; a couple of media buddies with whom I like to catch up most Fridays. But I've come here early for a purpose: to begin a journey, an exploration of my life and, more directly, the place where I now live it. And this morning I want to discover where it is I should begin such a story. It seems only right that a book about Alice Springs begin somewhere in the town. And yet, I know that Alice Springs is just as much a town of my imagining, as it is a town of bricks and mortar, granite and river sand, love and hatred, raw beauty and terrible violence.

Of course, like any story, there is a before. My before was in Sydney, in the music scene trying to make a living from performing, sometimes writing for newspapers,
then on a half-baked tour round the country with a band that was already losing its
reason for being. Before was always rowdy and chaotic, but probably more fun than I
may ever want to have again. Perhaps I loved it more than I had any right. Moved
house more times than I would want to count and didn't stay still for almost a decade.
Touring, playing one-night stands across New South Wales, interstate, and always
talking up the nomadic life I was living, the mysterious place I was heading: never
realising that all had taken their toll.

Blaise Pascal believed all of our grief as humans stems from our inability to live at
peace in a room. Perhaps. Certainly writing about one's life and the place in which it
occurs is to examine the ripple effects of a stone thrown into a pond. The action itself
affects one's perception of the pond, precipitates the ripples, sets them ever in
motion. By stepping in, we cease to be an observer, becoming instead a part of the
rippling. We are, in the end, both cause and effect. For a great deal of my life I have
remained the nomad, riding the ripples as I created them. Following them to see
where it was they might lead. I have had more ‘careers’ than I care to count:
engineer, teacher, builder, gardener, musician, journalist and more. And still there are
times I ask myself whether it is wise to charm the nomad in oneself, coax the
traveller out of his vehicle and make him stay put, that fellow so at peace in the
unknown. And further, to encourage him to reach for security, make a place in the
known, all to become content in the familiar. Part of me had once been so. Could I be
that person again? The accumulation of 'stuff' had never been my aim. However, I
wanted a place for my daughter to come and live should she want, and to share a
home with the woman I loved. Part of me ached for a base, a fixed point in space to
which I could always return. An anchor. Could I be happy there? Would I recognise a
settled sense of wellbeing if I fell over it? Or would I be forever looking over some
crest, to whatever lay beyond. Could I be that elusive creature, the contented man?
One thing was certain to me as I approached my fortieth year and the end of the
twentieth century: doing a ‘geographical’ hadn't been the answer in the past, and was
unlikely to be the answer now. Then again, I had no idea of the question. Either way,
it had become apparent I had to make a move. And so, out of the midst of such chaos,
the Alice Springs phase of my life began with a single clear decision.

III

On the second day of 2001, I left family New Year celebrations in New South Wales
with my fiancée Fiona to drive three days west through 40-plus temperatures, and
into the Northern Territory. With as many of our worldly possessions as we could
cram aboard, a well-worn copy of E. Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News*, and no
serviceable air-conditioning, we drove up the steep dirt drive of her brother's rural
property near Kyogle and steered for Alice Springs where I was to take up a position
as news reporter with the twice weekly *Centralian Advocate*. Ultimately I would
become the newspaper’s editor. Fiona didn't have a job to begin when we arrived.
And I had precious little experience in journalism. But that wasn't a problem. Jobs
were easy to come by in Alice. It was all part of a plan to escape the rat race, pull our
fragmented lives together and find some sort of meaning. Previous visits had shown us we might find some inkling of that meaning in Alice Springs. It was to be the year the musician and the massage therapist started over. After 11 years together. Much of it turbulent. Is it any wonder most thought us mad?

Fiona had not long returned from three months overseas, a trip that, originally, she had called "open-ended". Time to think, she'd said. We had been engaged twice before. But we drifted. Lost our focus. When Fiona cut short the trip and returned a few months earlier in November, she met up with me in Alice Springs where I was playing gigs. We drove a few kilometres out of town to Emily Gap, where an ancient river — now mostly dry — cuts through the sandstone bluffs of the East MacDonnell Ranges. It is an Aboriginal sacred site. Here the creation beings, the giant caterpillars of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) rose from the earth, and would later return. In the dreaming story of the place, the caterpillars emerge to form the nearby Gap, then, creating as they walk, head southward, giving rise to many of the topographic features between Alice Springs and the Simpson desert.

In her heels and black dress, blonde hair spilling over one shoulder, Fiona dropped to one knee in the damp river sand and asked me to marry her. Besides her doing the asking — she'd reckoned it was about her turn — I could tell it was different this time. Darkness was descending fast and the ranges turned purple in the fading light. Brewing above was the mother of all electrical storms. But neither of us could stop ourselves from laughing with pure joy. We couldn’t hear a thing over the noise of the incipient storm. And by the time we had hugged each other enough times — there are few words tuned to these moments — enormous drops of rain were drenching us to the skin. Finally it fell in sheets. We hurried back to the car then on to dinner, with only a quick stop along the way to tell our friend Sharyn the good news.

IV

Under the mulga at Olive's botanical garden, it is difficult not to be swept up by a sense of her, the ghosts, real or imagined, of her deeds in that place. She left her stamp. Perhaps most extraordinary, is that she didn't come to Central Australia until well into her forties. Born in 1884, she became interested in Aboriginal welfare after she visited Daisy Bates at her Ooldea camp in South Australia during 1926-7. Educated in Hobart, she studied art with a sculptor at the Hobart Technical School, and later taught there. She moved to Perth, then Sydney where she gave private art lessons. But her fierce temperament hampered her, and she took a job as a tracer with the NSW Department of Public Works.

A few years after her visit with Daisy Bates, she came to Central Australia on a sketching tour. She became concerned at the living conditions of the Aboriginal people there, and returned to Sydney with an interest in anthropology, attended some lectures at the University of Sydney, but never qualified. Still, that didn’t stop Olive from securing grant funding to work among the eastern Arrernte people in Alice Springs during the 1930s. By then her lack of qualifications had infuriated Ted
Strehlow, who was conducting unrelated research at Hermannsburg, about 130 kilometres west of Alice Springs. Later, Strehlow would become the first to write of local Aboriginal people — the Arrernte — as anything other than stone-age primitives doomed to extinction. Olive managed to upset Ted so much that he moved to have her locked out of Aboriginal reserves and missions.

Undaunted and with help from the Quakers, and from the Sheetmetal Worker's Union of Sydney — a connection that would see her later investigated by ASIO — Olive returned to Central Australia in 1942 to set up a sanctuary for Aboriginal people on a grazing lease at Papinya in the Tanami north west of Alice Springs. She lived there for four years until a series of misfortunes saw her take refuge back at Alice. With very little money she lived in a hut, charging admission for people to see her wildflower paintings and other curios, later living in a tent, then moving on to some land on the eastern banks of the Todd River. It was here the flora reserve was named in her honour as the Olive Pink Botanical Garden, at the eye of a hurricane in which the Aboriginal people she so adored refused to "die out". Olive herself died in Alice Springs Hospital aged 75 and is buried at the town's cemetery.

Perhaps, at the beginning, Olive Pink was not certain of her trajectory. Yet her relationship with Alice Springs and the broader region saw this uncertainty blossom, to become a sense of purpose. Could be this place digests uncertainty, regurgitates it as direction, chewing it over until it becomes a solid sticky substance tasting sweetly of belonging. When she first came to Alice Springs there were only a handful of white women living in the town. Even this she shunned to live a solitary life 300 kilometres to the town's west, studying Aboriginal ways, taking their cause to power, finding a life among them. Whatever it was she found, there was in Olive an essence; some in Alice Springs still retain it, a 'fuck you' resilience. A flexibility which is called upon again and again: call it temerity, or just plain doggedness.

Epigraphs: references cited


Twain, M., 2009, *Huckleberry Finn* (Camberwell: Penguin)
Graham hadn't wanted to move to Alice Springs. Miles from anywhere, real estate nearly as pricey as Melbourne, and getting a seat on a plane meant mortgaging your mother to Qantas. No thanks. Besides, the in-flight lunches were crap. Then, after all that, the town's full of blackfellas. He'd read about that particular hullabaloo in the paper. Drinking. Violence. Christ knows he had enough problems in that department himself. Maybe it would have been smarter just to stay put, especially after losing his driver's license. No more blues like the howler at Molly Blooms, that's for sure. Funny the way a few beers after work can turn into four weeks off with a rooted shoulder. Celeste hadn't found it funny. Long story short, he could just as easy have landed in a cell.

One thing about Melbourne though, it was like blackfellas didn't exist. 'Cept Boney of course, the token abo kid from school. Wonder where he ended up? Not a bad fella. Always got a raw deal from teachers. Graham could never work out whether having your country nicked from under your nose would make a bloke drink any more or not. Prob'ly. Any excuse.

Then Celeste got the job offer. Good school too. Senior dibs. Wages to match. Too good to miss. Besides, there was plenty of government cash being thrown about in Alice Springs, especially with the intervention. And that meant loads of building work. A bit of security. He had to admit, Melbourne could get pretty dreary on the work front, one bang-it-up formwork contractor after another. He'd been just as happy to see the end of that. And the fog and bloody drizzle. But the desert? He just wasn't sure. Never imagined himself a desert sort of bloke.

Then she arrived, one Sunday. Sing-song greeting over the top of the driveway gate, two bloody syllables twisted into too many: 'Hellooeeoo'. Celeste was out. Pilates class. He'd slept in. Again. That was the difference between him and Celeste; she never stopped. Always telling him to look after himself. Paid off for her though. She looked great. Gorgeous in fact. He'd been lucky. Mind you, work kept him fit. And Celeste always said he had good arms. Anyway, as his mates liked to point out, there was no doubting who was the smarter of the pair. The call came again from the front door.

Graham pulled on his robe and weaved his way from the bedroom to the foyer, between the piles of concrete rubble, broken bricks, half-swept piles of masonry dust. Where he'd soon be fitting new glass sliders were the busted-arse old ones and a makeshift plywood wall. Outside, the gate dividing the front yard from the back was already finished; he'd built that from the timber that'd made up the fence it replaced. After the air-con in the bedroom the heat outside hit him like a mallet. He checked his watch: only 10. By two, he could forget any work on the shed footings. Tried that
last weekend; swinging a pick over red dirt in 40-plus wasn’t this chippie's idea of a relaxing Sunday. Days like this he was a cat's whisker from packing a bag. Trouble was, Celeste was settling in all hunky dory. Loving her school. And fallen for the littlies big time; especially the Aboriginal kids. Even picked them up from home to ferry them to school in a special bus, give them breakfast. Never happen for white kids. The only Aboriginal bloke Graham had worked with stopped turning up after two days on the job.

Graham closed the slider and wiped his forehead open palmed. He pulled on the gate, and found himself face to face with an Aboriginal woman from up the road standing in his driveway. They'd never spoken. He was about to say G'day, but then noticed — for the first time up close — her alarming form. What looked like a once bright-yellow blouse fell like a damp sack over her collapsed arm muscles, ended in a scrape on the dark skin of her pot belly. She was clutching a pumpkin to her hips.

A gift, the woman said, because your wife is so beautiful and friendly.

Jutting her chin once at the vegetable, arms straining, she poked it forward, risking dropping the thing. There was no option but to take it.

Celeste must have spoken to her. Sure, Graham had seen her before, ambling past the house round dawn mumbling to herself, ignoring every bugger. Her dyed-orange hair stuck out at impossible angles, finally collapsing to her shoulders like a building demolished by explosives experts. Celeste reckoned she was chatting to herself in her native tongue. Right. Seemed to Graham she was wearing a sign saying: Keep Clear.

Graham didn’t want the pumpkin. She wanted something he reckoned, and whatever it was he didn’t want to give it. But then, he'd been trying to turn over a new leaf. Play polite in the new town, like Celeste said. So many things had changed since Alice. Sometimes he found it hard keeping up. So he took the pumpkin, eased it on to the outdoor table. And there it sat: a blue-grey problem with ridiculous curly top. To be honest, he felt like giving it straight back. But it was one of those things; Celeste might have called it a nice gesture. In the end, he thanked the woman instead.

Make sure you show it to your beautiful wife, the woman said. Then waved goodbye. That evening, Celeste made pumpkin soup. Delicious, Graham said. He pulled a bottle of Jacobs Creek. She froze the leftovers, and that was that.