

A Baker's Dozen of Questions for Dianne Wolfer

- 1. It seems to me you're like a bowerbird, collecting bits and pieces of information – articles, postcards, notes etc. How many of these end up as ideas in books, or trigger the books themselves?**

Being a writer often *does* feel bowerbird like. For every idea, object or snippet that I store in my study, only a handful end up in a book. The others are there waiting, sometimes for years and years for their turn... Several of my books have been sparked by magazine/newspaper articles. For example, *Lighthouse Girl* was triggered by the following paragraph written by Ron Crittal in *The Weekend Australian* in April 2005: *Perth man Don Watson tells of his mother, Fay Catherine Howe, daughter of the Breaksea Island lighthouse keeper. She was just 15 and stood on the island signalling to the departing fleet in morse code, almost certainly the last human contact with Australia. Numerous postcards came back to Albany from the Middle East, addressed to "The little girl on Breaksea Island".*

I began wondering whatever happened to those postcards, and four years later I had a book!

- 2. You talk about having a system for keeping all this information organized – can you tell the readers a little about this system – and how it's proved useful.**

I'm not the most organised person in the world, so for me, having a system is essential. I keep ideas in manila envelopes which are then stored in magazine files along shelves in my study. As an idea grows it moves from the file into a plastic sleeve folder and then, once an idea takes off, I keep everything relating to that project in a plastic tub. When stackable tubs are on special, I bulk buy!!

3. Can you tell us a little about the process of working with an illustrator – do you influence each other? Has an illustration ever made you change some of your text?

I enjoy collaborating with illustrators. Perhaps this is due to the solitary nature of my profession... It's wonderful when someone else gets involved and shares your passion for a story. But it's not always easy when someone changes your ideas. Over time, I've learnt to ease back and try to leave more room for the artist. In the final editing stages it's not unusual for me to trim words if an illustrator has 'shown' what I am saying.

4. I understand that you collected beach debris and so on from Albany which you then sent to the Fremantle-based illustrator of *Lighthouse Girl* in order to ensure the illustrations were geographically accurate. Can you tell us more about this?

I think it's important to check facts during the writing process to make details as factually correct as possible. Albany and Breaksea Island (the setting of Fay's story) are on the Southern Ocean. The designer and illustrator live in Perth on the Indian Ocean. To ensure geographical accuracy I collected shells, seaweed and plants from Albany to send to Fremantle Press. This was fine until one post-pack didn't make it before the weekend and maggots had hatched amongst some very stinky seaweed. The beach debris I collected makes its way into the story via sketches in Fay's journal.

5. *Lighthouse Girl* contains a lot of archival material – how long did it take you to compile this material and was it your idea to include it in the book?

Lighthouse Girl took four years from idea to publication. I'd originally planned a 32 page picture book, along the lines of my earlier book *Photographs in the Mud*, however Fay's story kept growing. As the project evolved I found so much interesting archival material and had sourced so many fascinating archival photographs that it seemed a shame to limit the story. Luckily Cate Sutherland, Children's Publisher at Fremantle Press shared my enthusiasm and supported my vision for a longer work.

The book became a collaboration between Cate, myself, illustrator, Brian Simmonds and designer, Tracey Gibbs.

6. From the first idea, triggered by a newspaper article, how long did take you to complete and publish *Lighthouse Girl*?

Four years.

7. An enormous amount of research has gone into the writing – and making – of this book – do you find that sometimes the researcher overwhelms the writer? Was there research you uncovered that you simply had to leave out?

Often the research did seem overwhelming – particularly the hours (days, weeks...) spent in the Albany Library's historical collection, scanning microfiche copies of *The Albany Advertiser*. Not a lot was known about the details of Fay's life on Breaksea Island. Even Fay's son, Don Watson knows little about those years, and so by necessity I needed to thoroughly research the era, then use my imagination to flesh out the bones of fact to create my story. For each final 'journal' page there were files of archival material, so unfortunately I had to leave out many great images and old photographs.

8. *Lighthouse Girl* breaks picture book rules – the story is complex and moves from third person to first person. It rocks in at 117 pages and 6000 words. Did you have trouble convincing Fremantle Press to accept it and at what age group is the aimed?

Although best known for my children's fiction, I write for all ages and my first publications were for adult readers. *Lighthouse Girl* has broken all sorts of rules. In addition to the things already mentioned, the readership also crosses age boundaries. Students from Year Two through to Year Twelve enjoy Fay's story. Adults also love it. Some of the most passionate feedback has come from seniors. Perhaps because they have closer memories of that era. The story was not written with a particular age group in mind but I am pleased that it has found such wide readership.

9. Can you explain why you chose to move from third person narrative to the first person diary entries?

I often write from multi-viewpoints. It seems to help me explore a subject or character more fully... My earlier picture book, *Photographs in the Mud* and YA novels, *Choices* and *Dolphin Song* are also told from two different points of view.

10. I understand you made a dummy book for this book – can explain to the readers what this entailed and why you did it?

Creating a mock-up or ‘dummy book’ helps me see how the text and visuals are working together - to try and visualise the final product. I do this by getting a scrapbook or large blank paged notebook, pasting in the text and then sticking in photographs, sketches and other archival material. Then the cutting and pasting begins...

11. You spoke of crystallising a picture book down to one moment – could you talk about that process in reference to *Lighthouse Girl*?

There is a moment in every story when a character comes to life. Usually characters are compilations of people and characteristics that interest me. In Fay’s case it’s more complicated as she was a real person. The Fay I have created is based on a real girl but she is fictitious. However my version of Fay lives on in my imagination. For me the ‘coming to life’ moment is the image of Fay signalling to the AIF troops with semaphore flags.

12. A lot of money has been spent in getting this quality of production - the tactile beauty of the book has to be held to be fully realised - can you tell us a little about how Fremantle Press is marketing the book and what elements of marketing you see the author as contributing to?

Fremantle Press has been wonderful throughout the journey from idea to publication. The book has just been released in soft back after two hardback print runs. Of course

I'd have loved the hardback version to continue forever, but the soft back which is slightly smaller with a brighter cover (and CBCA Notable sticker) is also lovely. Claire Miller, the Publicist at Fremantle Press is a dynamo. She has created a variety of interesting publicity events. I enjoy travelling and have presented sessions focusing on Fay's story at schools & libraries across WA, in the Northern Territory and ACT as well as Brisbane, Cairns, Albury and Melbourne. I'll be in Sydney in September and hope to visit more schools there...

13. Finally, Dianne – what are you currently working on and what will we see published next – and when?

As usual I'm juggling several projects. Two novels are in the final stages of a rewrite. One is a fantasy aimed at readers around 10-12 years. The other *Shadows Walking* is a YA/crossover novel set on the Kokoda Track, PNG during WW2. It's been on the go for almost 10 years and was the reason I walked the track in 2002. *Photographs in the Mud* was a surprise by-product of that research trip and is a snapshot of the theme of this larger manuscript. I have several young reader chapter books on the go and a picture book, *Granny Grommet and Me* for ages 3+ in production with Walker Books. Hopefully that one will be out in 2011/12.