

The Looking Glass

<http://www.tlmmagazine.org/hazel-edwards.html>

Interview with Hazel Edwards about

Writing Non Boring Junior History

Hazel Edwards is an Australian author of over 200 books and was awarded an OAM (Order of Australia) for Literature in 2013. Best known internationally for 'There's a Hippopotamus on our Roof Eating Cake', recently she has been writing historical 'faction' for young readers and also runs workshops for adults on 'Writing a Non Boring Family History'. Each birthday, she writes a personal story for her two grandsons. Check out her [website](#) for more information on her past and present work.

Interviewed by Dominique Twomey

What attracted you to writing about real heroes?

History is a kind of 'looking glass' where you check out personalities from the past and work out ways they are relevant to you NOW.

A children's author's role is to craft those facts to entice young readers. I became interested because there were so many children who knew little about the 'extraordinary' so-called ordinary people from their own families and cultures. They only saw misbehaving 'celebs' like footballers in the media, not real heroes whose qualities were worth admiring.

Why are anecdotes important to 'hook' young reader interest?

I call it 'Anecdultery'. Anecdotes are mini stories, usually humorous, but real. When surgeon Weary Dunlop broke his nose playing rugby, it's said he put a toothbrush up his nose and kept playing. (That appeals to 10 year old football fans.) Using a pair of socks, he demonstrated to medical students, how to sew up a patient. They remembered the surgical sewing skills learnt, and so do the ten-year-old readers who read on to learn more about an heroic doctor.

Writing about REAL people, is different from creating fiction. But it's also like becoming a literary detective, sleuthing the facts, but then making a

story which will appeal to that aged reader. And often to their families who find junior history a quick overview to a subject which provides a context. Grandparents often buy the factual book, supposedly for their offspring but really for themselves.

What is faction?

I use the term **FACTION** which is part way between fact and fiction and used to make the story more dramatic. But if the brief also includes appealing to a ten year old reader, I have to decide on viewpoint, and include zany anecdotes likely to interest.

What are the challenges of crafting history for young readers?

Whether to tell in chronological order is a challenge. I prefer to start with the most dramatic and then flashback. With the commissioned Weary Dunlop book, I started with the idea of using his Melbourne statue as the symbolic structure. I took a photo with my 10 year old alongside the tall statue because he typified the potential readership. Since Weary was a rugby player, I was going to use his 'feet' as one chapter, his surgeon 'hands' as another, the Buddhist peace sign for an 'ideas' chapter and because he cast a long shadow, that would shape another chapter's content.

But the publisher wanted it rewritten in chronological order with emphasis upon childhood So I rewrote but included the research photo.

I decided to make the major theme his resourcefulness as an ex farm boy in 'making do' and creating surgical equipment in the camps.

What are the challenges you faced writing about non-fictional heroes?

You need to do lots of reading to find an 'angle' or a theme from which to present the person. Another challenge is how much of the 'real' detail do you include. I think the flaws of heroes should also be indicated, and the real difficulties they faced. But it's debatable how much emphasis should be placed on tragic events, like Edith Cowan's father being hanged for the murder of her step mother. Or the children and pets who died in the Titanic sinking. Weary was tortured in the prisoner of war camps in WW11 but it was his leadership and doctoring skills which saved him and others.

Always a dilemma to decide is what should be included and how it should be written about. Over-dramatising is not appropriate. It's a fine line between making something dramatic and retaining interest and yet stressing the qualities those tragic events might have brought out in your character. For example, when Edith Cowan's mother died, the seven-year-

old girl was sent to a boarding school in faraway Perth (WA), her father remarried, shot his second wife and was hanged when Edith was 17. But Edith was also the first female member of parliament, and is a notable woman on a \$50 banknote. Her educational reforms affected the subsequent lives of many families.

Then there are the remaining relatives of your characters who will read your book. Often people will come up to me and say they worked with 'Weary' in hospitals, and tell me extra stories. Usually they agree the book is a genuine portrait of the man and are very grateful to him for his persistence which saved lives. Even if he did annoy authorities at times. Similarly for Fred Hollows. The single-mindedness necessary to achieve significant things, often upsets small minded people who can't see beyond the bureaucratic rules and regulations. Edith Cowan used charm but persistence too. Stoicism is a common trait as well as risk-taking.

I wanted to write about female heroes next, so I asked for a woman as the next Aussie Heroes subject, and was given Edith Cowan, the first woman elected into parliament and who has a Western Australian university named after her. She is on our Australian \$50 note, so I started with the idea of a 'notable' woman because most kids are interested in money. Then there was the legal problem of whether we could copy a bank note as a possible cover.

Another challenge was choosing the visuals for Edith. In the photo fashion of the times, Edith always looked sternly formal, which was off putting for young readers. Was it better to use the newspaper political cartoons satirizing her as a 'housewife' in the parliament or the 'hard nut to crack' brooch she gave to her supporters on getting elected as the first woman into an Australian parliament? Visuals matter for young readers.

To what extent do book covers matter?

A lot. But this is often a publisher or marketing department decision. Illustrations inside also matter and I'd prefer these to be photos, but often there are copyright or fee issues.

Do you think that heroes such as Professor Fred Hollows and Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop are as exciting and inspiring as superheroes such as Superman and Batman?

They can be, it's just that often students haven't been told about them in the

same way as the multi million dollar PR budgets of film companies can 'market' a fictional hero.

Once kids are introduced to 'real' people, they are more 'inspired' to try themselves.

And often I'm asked 'was this real?'

I'd like to see more easily available stories about inspirational people who are NOT footballers behaving badly on the front pages on newspapers.

Young people see 'celebs' as aspirational for 'being in the media' rather than doing something.

A hero is one who benefits the community in which he or she lives, solves a problem, discovers an answer or is a good example by their actions.

From a writer's perspective it's easier to portray 'action', so the sports heroes rather than the scientists or thinkers, tend to be written about.

I'd like to see more books and TV series portraying 'real' local heroes who may include fire-fighters, cancer cell researchers or even those who on a daily basis look after others, at their own cost. I'd also like to see more historical heroines portrayed and realistic writing about how they juggled families, jobs and community problems.

Why do you provide discussion notes for your books?

Because teachers will be more inclined to use the book in the classroom, but also an important readership is grandparents and parents who often share with the child. And the fact that the subject of the book was a contemporary whom they knew personally, makes history real for the child.

Do you always write books or have you experimented in writing history in other formats?

'Titanic Dog' is an **animation** from the dog's viewpoint of the Titanic sinking and the issue of courage.

'**Enact**' is a collection of classroom playscripts, based on REAL Australian women, which can be performed, humorously, in the classroom and elsewhere. Each has an 'elastic' chorus, enabling everybody to be involved. The value of a play is that the actors think about the content as they rehearse and perform, parents are often involved as audience or with costumes, and all find out about 'Real' people from the past, in an entertaining way.

'**Antarctic Close Up**' is part of an Australian National Museum series, where each story is based around a piece of memorabilia from their collection. Mine was the telescope from the Mawson 1912 Antarctic expedition which

belonged the John Close (hence the title). But it is ‘faction’ because a contemporary 10 year old boy had to be included but there were none. So I made it a time jump story via a web-cam, today’s equivalent of the telescope. Since I’d been an Antarctic expeditioner in 2001, I was also able to include my on-the-ice experience as participant-observation research.

Fake ID, now an e-book, is a YA novel with a family history mystery theme and a teen sleuth. On the day of her Gran’s funeral, Zoe discovers Gran had fake ID for years. Historical refugee links to 1956 Hungarian revolution and Melbourne Olympics and much research help from a genealogist. Fiction but factual settings and refugee dilemmas. It would be timely to have an international TV series on Heroes, with each culture contributing several episodes, but aimed at a general children’s audience. Often adults enjoy an easy introduction to a period or a persona via kids’ history books or programs.

Useful Links to Hazel’s Historical Books for Kids:

http://www.hazeledwards.com/page/sir_edward_weary_dunlop.html

http://www.hazeledwards.com/page/professor_fred_hollows.html

http://www.hazeledwards.com/page/writing_a_non_boring_family_history.html