

## **Stephen Scourfield**

### **On writing Other Country**

I write every day—for a living and for myself. I just sat down one day and started on my own work, and these two young guys appeared, in words, on the screen before me. They were in the kitchen of a cattle station I had visited, very briefly, more than a decade before. I could see every detail of it—the plates, the walls, the furniture, and the nasty old man that ran the place. Then, as I continued to type, one could sense a hiatus. The young blokes—his sons—weren't going to put up with it anymore. They were going to leave the place, and I was going with them. We jumped in the ute and, as we were all leaving, the younger brother asked "what's the plan?" There was no plan. They had no plan for their lives and I had no clear plan for the book. Just as they were going to make up their lives as they went along, so Other Country was going to reveal itself day by day, step by step. So, in that sense, the initial inspiration came from the brothers themselves, and they are conglomerates of the many of people I have met and known over 20 years' travelling in the Kimberley, and thousands of intense snapshot memories of the landscape. So, the true inspiration came from a dramatic landscape and the people that are both drawn to it and shaped by it.

The important thing with the book was to have contact with it every day. I had to keep it going forward all the time, and that's how I'd do it. I gave myself the word "contact", rather than "writing". I didn't have to write it forward every day, but I would have at least one hour's contact a day – every day, without fail, wherever I was in the world, whatever else I had to write, whatever I was doing. I kidded myself that I would just potter around in the manuscript and that would be enough to keep it alive, but invariably the words just started coming out. Ace and Billy were busting to go off and do something, and they took me along with them. "Alright, alright ..." It might be 2am in the morning and I might be whacked, but off we went.

Having this daily "contact" reminded me of logging onto the computer itself – sometimes it seems slow as if it's doing something in the background (probably communicating surreptitiously with some infiltrating website). And so it was with the book. Some operating system was running and when I sat down to work on it, something had moved on inside me. I seemed just able to jump back into the mindset and the place and situation at any time.

And how did I write? I carry a small Apple Mac laptop with me all the time, with a spare battery in my bag. Eight hours of bliss. You never know where you'll just get a bit of time. When I am away travelling, which is frequently, I add an iPod to back up work into, and my camera bag of course. The digital age; it's all so much easier.

But, as happened on a plane the other day, if the batteries are both empty, I'm as happy with some sheets of paper and a nub of pencil. Five hours without the phone ringing is too precious to waste, and it really doesn't matter what technology you use to record the words.

The editing process was one of the best experiences I've had in 30 years of publishing. I was surrounded by talented people committed to helping me push the book to the next level. Incredible.

### **What inspired you to write *Other Country*?**

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### **What are the main themes of *Other Country*?**

Landscape, family, religion, ethic, thinking. The possibility of migrating within yourself – the true "other country" of the title.

The book incorporates the great themes with which I have been engaged over those decades – use of landscape, and our changing thoughts about this, recurring family history and the possibility of breaking repeating patterns; of taking control and moving on; of the abundance of every sort in a life, and poverty in a life.

### **When did you start writing?**

It's just what I have always done. As a child I used to write and sew together little books – three pushed-through holes and a needle and thread to make a spine binding. From an early age I have written every day for myself, and from the age of 18 I have written every day for a living too.

I have written for, and edited, magazines and books in Australia and overseas, and I am currently Travel Editor of *The West Australian*, publishing up to 44 pages of travel a week in a magazine-style publication. A life of traveling, observing, writing and interpreting. Some kind of dream I'm in.

**Who or what was the biggest inspiration for you to become a writer?**

My mother is so proud that she got me a library card when I was two years old – “the youngest ever member of that library”. She read to me constantly as a child. I still my original “Swallows and Amazons” and recently bought the complete set of Arthur Ransome’s republished works. When I was teenager, I met an artist and wood carver, and worked with him for a while. He was the perfect philosopher and mentor for an adolescent boy. I had been reading Thomas Hardy and others voraciously, and was heavily under the influence of Welsh writers, particularly Dylan Thomas. But this man, Arthur, introduced me to the likes of Knut Hamsun, Herman Hesse and Rainer Rilke. I just tracked down a hardback copy of Hamsun’s *Hunger* ... if ever a book changed a young man’s perception of literature, that was it.

And all the while, I was out over the fields and hills of my idyllic country childhood in Malvern, a green and genteel part of England overlooking the Black Hill of Bruce Chatwin’s novel of the same name, learning landscape and emotion, and naturally driven to interpret and explain it. Imagine the thrill when I read the introduction to Nicholas Shakespeare’s biography of Bruce Chatwin and found he was had looked through the proofs of the book in his grandmother’s front room, on the Malvern Hills, overlooking the Black Hill. My grandmother’s cottage was the highest house on those hills, looking in the same direction. Her cottage was the place of the imaginary piebald ponies of my childhood. I was always close-by.

**Where do you do your writing?**

I write every day and I write everywhere. On a laptop killing four or five hours in the departure lounge of an airport. With a stub of old pencil on the back of some sheets of paper. None of that matters – it’s just the order of the thought and the order of the words that matter.

Having said that, I have a fantastic little study, with my musical instruments racked up, shelves full of favourite books staring at me, the walls covered in artworks and fabrics from around the world. A real den. I love it.

**What are you working on at the moment?**

*The Way of the Snake*, which Allen and Unwin is also going to publish. Although *The Way of the Snake* is about a different landscape and very different people, it feels like a natural progression from *Other Country*. Where *Other Country* takes a broad sweep over landscape issues, the central theme of *The Way of the Snake* is a very specific one – water. In that sense, it is a global story, as fresh water is a dominating problem across the world, and will become increasingly more political and poignant.

*The Way of the Snake*, once again, set in remote Australian Outback country, but more in Aboriginal communities, mining, eco tourism and environmentalism than cattle country. But it also dips into city life and the vagaries of government.

The story is, once again, immersed in landscape, but over and above all of this, it is a love story, and an uplifting classic clash between good and evil.

I have researched hard for the past year and have clear outline of the book. The characters feel like a progression from those in Other Country – and it's good to have someone in my laptop to hang out with again.

**When you're not writing what do you do?**

I ride a motorcycle every day – always have. I play mandolin, guitar, bass guitar, violin and ukulele. I muck around in a band called Good Clean Fill: It's all we could ever hope to be. I've always paddled kayaks – sea kayaks, whitewater boats, skis – and maintain a “Wednesday night paddling” ritual with an inspiring mate. A good man with a good mind and good ethic. We do about 20km and sort out the world.

Sometimes we head off on epic Sunday family picnics, right out into the bush to light a fire and cook sausages. My wife's a contemporary conceptual artist, just finisher a doctorate. Fantastic mind. Our son's a ripper. Lasseter, my dog's, a legend.

Whenever I can, I just chuck the swag and Lasseter in the 4WD and take off.

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**Resources**

- [www.australiasnorthwest.com.au](http://www.australiasnorthwest.com.au)
- [www.kimberleytourism.com](http://www.kimberleytourism.com)
- [www.savethekimberley.com](http://www.savethekimberley.com)
- [www.stopthetoad.com](http://www.stopthetoad.com)
- [www.BeyondBlue.org.au](http://www.BeyondBlue.org.au)