

Know the Author

Dianne Wolfer

by Joanna Andrew

Dianne Wolfer is the Albany based author of fourteen books who grew up in Melbourne, Bangkok and Albury. Dianne commented that *my life seems to have been a series of journeys. My first memories of home are in Doncaster, a suburb of Melbourne. During the sixties, Doncaster's orchards were making way for suburbia. Our family was part of that transition.*

She added, my older sister and I grew up with a tribe of neighbourhood kids. We free-ranged together, played, had squabbles and made cubbies. She added that early childhood was a happy time. Looking back, I am sure that having the space and freedom to 'imagine' contributed much to that happiness.

*An exciting early memory is of the mobile library bus coming to our suburb. I can clearly picture (and smell) walking through the front door of the bus, receiving my library cards and being allowed to choose six new books. It was the best thing. Another early memory is doing my granny's hair in rollers each Sunday as she read from a beautiful old edition of **Dot and the Kangaroo**. My parents valued books, and Mum loved the bush poets.*

Influenced by a great teacher, Dianne began writing stories around Grade Three, and as she and her sister walked to school across a huge paddock with what we believed were wild horses she did not have far to look for inspiration. There were tall trees to hide behind and a dam full of slippery tadpoles. As we walked we told secrets and had adventures. On winter mornings we jumped onto thinly frozen puddles and marvelled at the magic of frosty cobwebs. It makes me sad that few kids now have that unsupervised walking-to-school experience.

Dianne's lifelong love of travel was sparked when she was eight by a special holiday on a cargo-passenger cruise to Fiji that her parents saved for. Dianne remembers that our taxi driver took us home to meet



Dianne and Harry with Breaksea Island, Albany, in the background.

his family and we shared their spicy Indian meal. We watched boys climb tall palm trees for coconuts and drank the strange milk. It was a great experience for a young girl from the suburbs. Two years later, her parents dropped a bombshell: Dad had a new job. We were moving to Bangkok. I remember the devastation of that announcement. But the two years they spent in Thailand from 1972-1974 probably changed Dianne's life completely, and were crammed with new experiences that even now I draw on in my writing. She caught tuk-tuks to the international school, was bitten by a monkey at a Thai theme park (they had to ring the keeper daily to check if one of the monkeys had developed rabies), experienced monsoonal floods, and was knocked down by a baby elephant. There was a lot to think about for an eleven year old.

Dianne's award-winning books include: a picture book for all ages (**Photographs in the Mud**), her most recent picture book for younger kids (**Granny Grommet and Me**), two that defy categorisation as they cleverly blend fiction and nonfiction and appeal to adults and teens and younger readers (**Lighthouse Girl** and **Light Horse Boy**), several short novels for a series of educational readers (**Being Billy** and others for Cengage Learning), two junior books, **Horse Mad**, and the other with a title that caused considerable joy among classes attending sessions with Dianne, **The Kid Whose Mum Kept Possums in her Bra**, (now sadly out-of-print but still for sale by the author) and

several young adult novels, **Border Line**, **Choices**, and **Dolphin Song**.

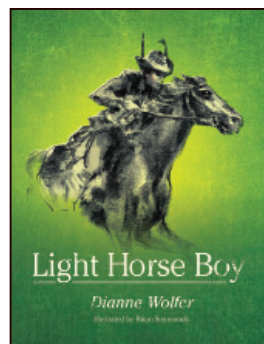
It's this variety, the vivid sense of place that comes from detailed research and wonderful writing, the use of different perspectives on the same events, and the respect Dianne shows for her character's choices and decisions, as well as her readers, that appeals to me. Although many of her books are firmly rooted in very particular places and times, the universality of the themes means they resonate with readers across the country and around the world. The stories preserve these places and times for future generations to discover.

At the end of high school, Dianne wanted to work in refugee camps along the Thai /Kampuchean border. She was told she would be more useful if she had some skills, so trained as a teacher then followed the backpacker path through Indonesia to Bangkok and on to Nepal. She recalls *There was a position as tutor in Jumla, western Nepal. I was ready for an adventure, so the more I heard about the remote and difficult conditions, the more I wanted to go. Dianne worked for Mennonite missionaries from Iowa. The nine months I spent in Jumla was my first real teaching job. Six mornings a week I taught a 13-year-old boy and his bright 10-year-old sister. The older boy's horse often joined us in the mud room that served as a school house. Life in Jumla was challenging, but in her free time Dianne penned letters, kept a journal, and*



Departure of the first detachment of the Australian and New Zealand Imperial Expeditionary Forces from King George Sound, Albany WA: Picture taken from Breaksea looking west; Sunday 1 November 1914.

Courtesy of the State Library of Western Australia, b1979966_7



fiddled around with my first attempts at writing short stories. As winter approached she had to decide whether to continue her travels. I'd already caught and named 21 rats in my mud hut and was wearing most of my clothes to bed because of the cold. When I saw my washing frozen on the line one morning, I decided it was time to leave. I returned to Australia via Perth, and WA has been home ever since.

Later, Dianne and her late husband lived for three years in a tiny two room apartment in Tokyo, where Dianne taught at the American School, an *amazing school that was founded in 1902.*

I asked Dianne whether living in all these different places has influenced her writing. She said *Definitely. Besides giving me an interest in other cultures and languages, it has made me curious about the way different people think and approach the world. My family are all travellers. I have German, Italian, Canadian and Chinese-Malay family members. Perhaps that's why so many of my books are told from more than one viewpoint.*

Dianne explained at the launch of her book **Lighthouse Girl** that she began writing it after reading an article titled *The Long Goodbye* written by Ron Crittal in **The Weekend Australian** newspaper on 23-24 April, 2005. The article talked about the departure of the first detachment of the Australian and New Zealand Imperial Expeditionary Forces from King George Sound in Albany. The fleet carried the first Anzacs, a Light Horse Brigade and a Division, thousands of young men from New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and New Zealand. The paragraph that stood out said *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 ... 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'.*

Dianne was so taken by this story that she contacted the journalist, and then Don. She said *Don and his wife Peg were very generous in sharing details of Fay's life. Although Don didn't know much about his mother's early years, he shared what he could. Just before the book went to print, he found the beautiful photo of Fay which appears in the end notes.*

Lighthouse Girl was a collaborative effort by Dianne and the team at Fremantle Press, from editor Cate Sutherland to book designer Tracey Gibbs. It is an intriguing mix of fascinating archival and factual material, such as real photographs of troops marching down Albany's main street, and a fictional diary kept by Fay, recording her thoughts about what is happening. Established artist and first time illustrator, Brian Simmonds, used a photograph of the editor's niece as Fay to keep her features consistent and found using stills from movies helped him to convey the emotions he needed to portray.

Dianne told me that copies of the panoramic photographs of the convoy can be seen around Albany, and that there is a film of the departure on a continuous loop at the Residency Museum. She also confirmed that the reason the photographs were not able to be published for several weeks in the newspapers at the time was because the German ship, the *Emden*, was patrolling the WA coastline.

The historic occasion of the gathering of the fleet involved some truly astonishing statistics and images, able to be put into context by **Lighthouse Girl**. More can be found on the 'anzacalbany' website; the link is at the end of the article, as well as the title of a book of photographs taken on the day of departure in 1914, some from Breaksea Island.

Light Horse Boy is written from the perspective of Jim, a gentle young man who loves horses. Jim's mate Charlie is the young man who sends postcards back to Fay on Breaksea Island. Jim and Charlie, like many of the young Anzacs, have no

idea what they are signing up for when they join the Light Horse Regiment and sail [they think to Europe but were re-routed] to Egypt in a fleet of 38 troopships carrying 30,000 soldiers and over 7,000 horses. Readers are drawn into their world and the excitement of training, leaving Australia for the first time, then the horror of war and the frontline of the battlefield, by the same factual and fictional strands used in **Lighthouse Girl**. The photographs, documents, facts and figures, alongside postcards and letters sent to Jim's sister, Alice, are woven together to provide an evocative and almost overwhelming reading experience. The text is interspersed with stunning charcoal sketches by Brian Simmonds. These illustrations will be featured at the Bologna Book Fair in March this year.

Light Horse Boy initially started with interest in the Japanese perspective as Dianne had lived in Japan, and was intrigued by the *Ibuki ... and the role this Japanese warship played in escorting and protecting the ships (and men and horses) of the 1st AIF convoy. It seemed sadly ironic that we were an ally of Japan in 1914 and Japanese sailors helped escort our soldiers during the journey to Gallipoli, and also helped to protect the convoy during Australia's first naval battle (against the Emden at Cocos Island in November 1914) but then in 1939 we were at war with Japan. Some of the same men perhaps served in both wars as did many Australians.* Dianne began to write a story about an imaginary Japanese cabin boy—the youngest fellow serving on the *Ibuki*, but, during her research, Dianne became interested in the horses and learnt that of all the beautiful *Walers* [Australian horses] only one, *Sandy*, came home. I knew I had to include *Sandy* in my story, and so my young man became an Australian farrier, the character of Jim. Dianne wonders if one day I will find time to write about a lad on the *Ibuki* (but not yet as I have ideas for a third story linked to another character). In the meantime, **Lighthouse Girl** and **Light Horse Boy** stand as companion volumes, giving balanced viewpoints of war at home and away.

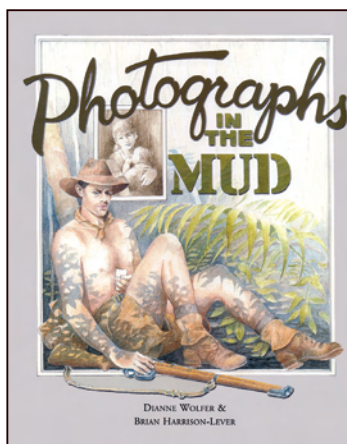
Earlier titles by Dianne have inspired me to find out more about where I live, and to share this knowledge through talks about discovering Western Australia's past and present through books.

Border Line tells the story of Cassie. Her Dad gets a job working for the Agricultural Protection Board, tracking and controlling rogue starlings that try to fly into Western Australia before they can ruin fruit and other crops. The book depicts the family's time in Eucla, and how Cassie adjusts to moving to such an isolated town. Apart from being a good read, this book really brought home an aspect of life in WA I hadn't known about. Checking on the Department of Agriculture and Food website I discovered that there are now pockets of starlings near Esperance and in the Kimberley, but due to decades of vigilance, they are not yet established in Western Australia. This story highlights Dianne's belief that *having a traveller's insight helps you see your own place with an outsider's perspective*. She tells kids that *to tell a great story, you need to realise how interesting your own place is*.

Choices has a sturdy scaffolding of research and a clear sense of place underpinning the non-judgmental split narrative that tracks teenager Elizabeth's choices following an unplanned pregnancy. In one narrative, as Beth, she decides not to have the baby, in the other, as Libby, she chooses to have the baby. Elizabeth's home is clearly located near the river and the university in Perth. If you know this area, you can picture it in your head as you read the book. The title has also been published in Polish.

During our discussion Dianne pointed out that *bits of life creep in* and confirmed that **The Kid Whose Mother Kept Possums in her Bra** is set in the south-west town of Denmark where she used to live. The book was inspired by a story Dianne's mother told about a (big busted) carer friend who took a possum to School for Seniors Art Class in order to keep it warm. *Characters resonate with things you believe in or interest you, and real life adds flavouring and colour*.

Photographs in the Mud was inspired by walking the Kokoda Track in 2002, and helps readers see that people have more in common than we realise; as Dianne says *skin is just the topping*. Since its publication in 2005, the book has been published in Japanese and used as a resource for international peace workshops around the world. Dianne said *perhaps that is one of my proudest achievements. When you have friends and family*



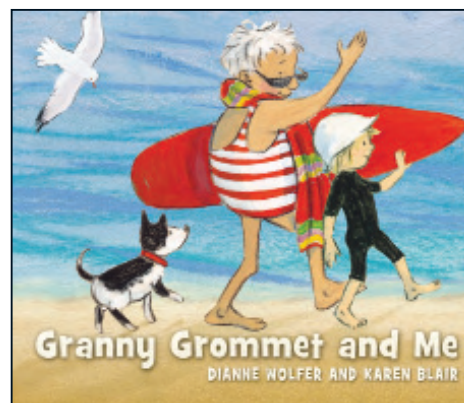
from other cultures, the thought of being at war with them is unbearable.

Dianne's most recent picture book **Granny Grommet and Me**, is a heart-warming and gentle story inspired by a group of body-surfing grandmothers at a local beach in Albany. Dianne met the illustrator of the book, Karen Blair, while she was doodling at a SCBWI conference. The illustrations in the book are an amalgam of both Middleton Beach and a rock-pool at Windy Harbour. Dianne sent photographs capturing these places to Karen, who is based in Perth. Apparently, one of the grannies portrayed stuck a photograph of her face onto one of the characters in all the pages she appeared in, in her granddaughter's copy of the book! It was a delicate balance to tell the story of these wonderful women whilst not being intrusive, as they just wanted to get on and surf as they always have. There are some lovely photos on Dianne's website.

In 2010, Dianne donated manuscripts and working documents from several of her books to the State Library under the Cultural Gifts Program. By boxing up original notes and drafts and donating them to the State Library, records of the development of the books have become part of the State's rich cultural heritage and available to all.

Dianne is active in the children's literature community, and received the 2013 Louise Schofield Award for Services to the Western Australian branch of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). Established in memory of children's author Louise Schofield, this biennial award is presented to an individual who has made a significant contribution to the children's book writers and illustrators community via their services to SCBWI West.

As if her writing is not enough, Dianne is completing a PhD in *anthropomorphism in children's literature* with a focus on



Australian books. This involves two pieces of writing; one is about World War II partly from a dog's perspective, and the other is quite a departure as it is a Young Adult fantasy novel set in Papua New Guinea—Dianne commented that it is *hard to invent a new world*.

Two new books by Dianne are in the pipeline. The first is a chapter book for emerging readers, **Annie's Snails**, illustrated by new kid on the block, Gabriel Evans. **Nanna's Button Tin** will be published in 2016.

Books by Dianne Wolfer:

Dolphin Song (1995) Fremantle Press

Border Line (1998) Fremantle Press

978 1 86368 208 4 Pb

978 1 92106 473 9 e-book

Choices (2001) Fremantle Press

978 1 92136 156 2 Pb

978 1 92169 615 2 e-book

Being Billy, Butterfly Notes, Iron Kid, Jungle Trek, Scuba Kid, Cengage Learning

Horse Mad (2005) Fremantle Press

978 1 92106 498 2 e-book

Photographs in the Mud (2005)

ill. *Brian Harrison-Lever*, Fremantle Press,

978 1 92136 104 3 Pb

The Kid Whose Mum Kept Possums in Her Bra (2006) Fremantle Press

Lighthouse Girl (2008) ill. *Brian Simmonds*, Fremantle Press,

978 1 92169 657 2 Pb

Light Horse Boy (2013) ill. *Brian Simmonds*, Fremantle Press,

978 1 922089 13 7 Hb

Granny Grommet and Me (2013) ill. *Karen Blair*, Walker Books, 978 1 921720 16 1 Hb

Annie's Snails (2014) ill. *Gabriel Evans*, Walker Books, 978 1 921720 63 5 Pb

References:

Interview with Dianne and subsequent email correspondence.

Something About the Author, Vol. 117 pp.205-220, Gale Group