

Q&A with Sulari Gentill

What inspired you to write *A Few Right Thinking Men*?

My husband is an historian with a particular expertise and interest in the radical right-wing political movements of the 1930s. I had never really paid much attention to the period until I started to write. Initially my motivation was purely pragmatic ... for me writing is an all consuming, semi-obsessive pastime ... I'm chatty and I like to chat about my books. I noticed that Michael's eyes had a tendency to glaze over whenever I launched into a discussion of my novels ... now that's probably forgivable, but irritating nonetheless. At first I tried shouting at him but he seems impervious to that ... and so I plotted. Initially my insidious plan was to write a novel set in the period of Australian history which he loved, thereby tricking him into paying attention. Once I had the setting, Rowland Sinclair seemed to evolve and get a life of his own, and I became as fascinated with the 1930s as my husband. Happily, my writing has now caught Michael's interest ... or he has finally learned to feign it.

How did you come up with the title?

"Right thinking men" was a phrase often used to describe both the men of the Old Guard and the New Guard. I came across it in my reading and immediately it jumped out as the perfect title, with connotations of both the right-wing political imperative, as well as the moral certainty of the guardsmen. In light of the more outlandish activities of the secret armies, the words "right thinking" also had a certain appealing irony.

How much of the book is realistic?

A Few Right Thinking Men is very historically based.

Jack Lang, Eric Campbell, Charles Hardy Jnr, Francis De Groot, Bill MacKay, Colin Delaney, John Dynon, Herbert Poynton, Fredric Hinton, Dr Maguire, Phil 'The Jew' Jeffs, Dr Reginald Stuart Jones, Snowy Billington and a few others, all exist in historical record, as do their actions. The events and timelines are also pretty accurate. I may have tampered with the date of the Bong Bong Picnic races but otherwise the rallies, riots, trials etc occurred on the dates stipulated in the novel.

I found I didn't need to fictionalise the events of the era ... the facts were fascinating and ludicrous enough. What I did do was write the personal story of Rowland Sinclair (who is a product of my imagination) into the extraordinary events of the early thirties.

What is the key message in your novel you want your readers to grasp?

What struck me when I first read about the events of this period, was the Australianness of it all. This might be the only country in the world where thousands of armed men can gather for revolution and in the end just decide to go home. I love the nuttiness of the time ... These men were seriously looking to overthrow the Lang Government by force and yet they seem obsessed with fancy dress, secrecy and code names. There's a kind of childlike innocence to it all. But even children can play with fire and end up burning down the house.

I think if there is any message in the book, it is about the earnestness of the men on all sides of the extremely divided political spectrum.

What kind of research did you do for this book?

The research for this book was made a lot easier by the fact that my husband knows this period so well. It meant that he could direct me

to the books and articles that would be most helpful as well as proof the manuscript for historical inconsistencies. It was a very efficient way to research.

I spent a lot of time looking through newspapers from the early 1930s, including several papers that were found when the hot water system burst at a friend's property. The newspapers had been used as insulation between the floorboards and the linoleum and so were discovered when the floor-coverings were pulled up. This kitchen-floor archive had been 'laid' in the 1930s and included papers like the *Smith's Weekly*. From them I gained a real feeling for the era.

As part of my "day job", I travel a lot through country NSW. It's really easy to imagine what some of these little rural towns would have been like in the thirties. The post office, the town hall, the pub are all still there. I remember pulling over outside the cemetery in Gunning, and seeing Chapter 16 unfold in my mind's eye.

Aside from the political history I looked into more mundane but equally important aspects like transport, plumbing, films, music, fashion and of course, art.

What was the hardest part of writing this book?

Finishing it was hard. I really enjoyed writing *A Few Right Thinking Men ...* I had to resist the urge to drag out the ending simply because I didn't want to stop writing. I also had to struggle with what to leave out ... there were other bits of historical craziness that I came across that I would have loved to weave into the story ... but if I'd indulged those whims I'd still be writing.

Did you learn anything from writing this book and what was it?

I learned that in the 1930s, madness was the order of the day.

When and why did you begin writing?

Seriously writing with an eye to making this my career—roundabout March 2007.

I used to write when I was a child ... melodramatic science fiction epics mainly. They were terrible.

In 2007, after way too many years as a lawyer, I had an idea for a YA series set in Greek Mythology, and I had friend, an ancient history teacher, who was willing to write with me. And so we just jumped in and wrote. It was a wonderful way to start writing. We motivated each other in a creative sense, in what at times seemed an explosion of ideas. I realised then that I didn't want to do anything else but write.

My husband then encouraged me to write crime fiction. I think his exact words were "Nobody cares about the ancient Greeks—write a murder." Excessively blunt, I know, but he's like that. Whilst I didn't necessarily agree with his dismissal of the ancient Greeks, I did try my hand at a murder mystery. I have to admit crime fiction is a fun genre.

Who is your biggest influence or inspiration?

Generally what inspires my writing is human interaction. I've always been fascinated by the way people behave and why. Often, if you just step back a little, people are really funny ... whether or not they mean to be. So little things inspire me ... I'll notice a personality quirk in someone, which will inspire a character, which will inspire a storyline, which will inspire a novel.

In a literary sense, I find the work of Oscar Wilde irresistible. I love the elegance of his writing and the wittiness of his dialogue.

I'm also stirred by art. In a way, Rowland Sinclair is an expression of the how I'd like to be able to paint. What I can't achieve with a paintbrush I have Rowland accomplish instead.

Where do you get your information or ideas from?

Information:

I do a lot of research on-line. The internet is an amazing boon to writers.

I pay close attention to local histories—the little stories of particular towns that are so often an echo of national movements.

Occasionally, I'll dig through newspaper archives, and I'm always talking to people. It's amazing what people know.

Ideas:

My novels usually start with ideas for characters. For example, as much as I thought it would be a good idea to set a novel in 1930s NSW, the story didn't really start to happen until Rowland Sinclair came to life. He evolved from the simple idea of making my protagonist/detective an artist from a conservative background. Similarly with my other books, I have a notion of the type of story I want to write etc but the characters once developed, seem to write the novel themselves.

Do you have any little quirks or habits when you are writing?

I buy a pen at the start of each new novel and use it until that novel is finished ... just for taking notes or jotting down ideas. I write the actual novel on my laptop. I always use the same type of notebook, but the pens vary with each novel ... I'm developing quite a taste for fancy pens!

What's the biggest obstacle you face when writing?

No matter what I do, I can't seem to make the world stop so that I can write. It's annoying. The children and the dog still insist on being fed occasionally.

What do you like to do when you're not writing?

Other than those things I have to do ... I like to paint ... mostly portraits. Like Rowland Sinclair, I don't paint trees at all well. I also like to shop—when I have money ... otherwise it's not fun at all.

As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

I wanted to be an astronaut ... but the stars that fascinated me were mythological, literary creations. Astrophysics was thus inevitably disappointing. It reduced my magnificent constellations with their legendary allure to balls of gas which could be described by mathematical formulae. I just wanted to find Orion in the night sky.

What are your future projects?

Hopefully there'll be several more Rowland Sinclair books. I really enjoy writing about him and the world he inhabits ... it's like hanging out with old friends. I'm writing the third book in the series at the moment. Each book leads me to so much discovery about the bizarre characters that were wandering around NSW in the thirties. I'm finding myself more and more delighted with being Australian.

I'm working on a young adult trilogy, based on Homeric legend. The first book of the series, *Chasing Odysseus*, will be out this year (2010) with two more to follow. The second and third books will, like the first, tap into the stories of Greek mythology which have always been a passion of mine.

I have also written a crime fiction set in ancient Athens, within the school of Aristotle. I've just started writing the second book. I'm not really sure where that series will go. The first book was my first independent novel and I've become rather fond of its characters.

I have a couple of other plots on the drawing board, including a ghost story, which I hope to get to sometime soon. Inevitably other

ideas will emerge ... sometimes inspiration hits you unexpectedly at the most inappropriate and inconvenient times.

I do like to work on several projects at once ... in a way writing in different genres keeps things fresh.

Do you have advice for other writers?

That's a hard one. Most writers primarily want to know how to find a publisher.

Hang in there—it's hard, sometimes demoralising and there's little that makes you feel more vulnerable than handing your manuscript over to be scrutinised. It's really difficult not to take rejection personally.

All I can say is that it's worth it. There is nothing like the buzz of being signed and working with people who are truly interested in what you've written, nothing as exhilarating as seeing your manuscript turn into a book. So hang in there—keep sending that manuscript out, keep trying to make it better ... it's worth it.