



WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY | Penny Harrison

## Telling Tales

A PASSION FOR BOOKS AND A KINSHIP WITH THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH HAVE HELPED SHAPE KATE MILDENHALL AS AN AUTHOR. PENNY HARRISON VISITS HER HURSTBRIDGE HOME AND STUDIO

**T**he treetop scene through Kate Mildenhall's studio window is picture perfect, but it's hard to imagine the Hurstbridge author ever has time to enjoy it. A mother of two young girls, Grace and Etta, Kate is deep into work on her third novel. Plus, there's an ever-growing pile of books to plough through and authors to interview for the podcast she co-hosts – *The First Time* – about the first time you publish a book. Then, there are the multiple teaching gigs and the events she is often asked to host. She's also just begun work on her PhD. Nonetheless, Kate says she always finds time to soak up the beauty of the Australian bush. "It's essential for me," she says. "I always feel regenerated by my time in the bush or by the sea."

It could have something to do with her childhood, growing up in Research and the Bend of Islands. Kate was 10 when she and her sister, Maggie, moved with their parents to the environmental living zone. The family lived in a shed while they built their mudbrick house, but the 2.5ha block on the banks of the Yarra River was an instant source of wonder. "We just thought it was magical," Kate recalls. "I would take my notebook and my pens and books, and I would sit under the trees and write lots of terrible poetry about the bush."

Books beckoned early in life and the Bend of Islands was the perfect place to hide with a favourite story. "Mum and Dad were teachers so there were always books and trips to the library and Eltham Bookshop. I read Anne of Green Gables in Grade 1 and continued to read voraciously." Part of the fantasy for Kate was the mezzanine bedroom and dormer window her parents built for her. "It was everything that a romantic, 11-year-old wannabe-writer desires," she remembers.

In Year 7, Kate threw herself into life at Eltham High. "I was fully into everything, the music and drama, and the friends I made are still my best friends today." The same year, Kate entered a writing competition run by best-selling author John Marsden. "I still remember receiving the letter to say I'd been shortlisted," Kate says. "It was so thrilling. I got to meet Marsden and was published in a book of short stories."



By Year 12, after countless writing accolades, Kate had set her sights on the writing and editing course at RMIT, only to be told by her careers teacher that 'smart girls don't do TAFE'. "So I didn't," she says. "I did film and television, and then gave that up to go travelling."

Kate continued to write and submit stories to competitions and anthologies. But it was when she was studying to be a teacher that her doubts crept in again and she decided to give it up. "I thought I just wasn't good enough," she says. "I was 22 and so naïve." It was another eight years before Kate picked up her pen again.

In that time, she married her long-term boyfriend from Eltham High, Adam, started work at the State Library and moved from the inner North to Hurstbridge. "It was when my kids were born that I had the urge to write again," Kate says. "I wrote in my journal and did an online poetry course, inspired by the verse novel of Lisa Jacobson. She told me the only course to do next was the RMIT writing and editing course, which is the one I originally wanted to do. So I enrolled."

In another serendipitous turn of events, Kate and her best friend picked Jervis Bay (NSW) off the map for one of their many family camping holidays. "We ended up camped next to an historical grave, which told the story of a young woman, Harriet, who lived in the lighthouse during the 1880s and died in a tragic accident," Kate recalls. "When I got home I started writing and, by the end of the semester, I had my first draft of Skylarking."





The publication journey that followed reads like a writer's fairy-tale. In a seize-the-moment move, Kate pitched her manuscript to a publisher at an event and, shortly after, was offered a contract by Black Inc. Published in 2016, *Skylarking* was longlisted for the Voss Literary Prize and the Indie Book Awards. At the first major writers' festival Kate was invited to, she found herself in the signing line with John Marsden. "Of course, he had people lined up outside the tent to see him (and I did not) but he remembered who I was and it was lovely."

Kate is quick to assure people that her fairy-tale run didn't last. Halfway through writing her second novel, she lost her publisher. Undeterred, she forged on, and eventually secured an agent. She even decided to sail from Darwin to Indonesia so she could better understand her character. "That was really informative because *The Mother Fault* is about the different layers of who we are and how we can be a mother and a version of our younger self at the same time," Kate says. "Lots of people thought I was crazy and, in retrospect, I probably was."

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The Mother Fault went to auction while Kate and her family were travelling around Australia. She talked with publishers from her camper trailer in a remote Aboriginal community and found herself accepting an offer from Simon & Schuster, for two books, at the top of a mountain range at the El Questro Station, the only place she could get reception.

A year later, the pandemic hit and Kate was forced to launch The Mother Fault during Melbourne’s first major lockdown of 2020. “Despite the disappointment, I feel incredibly lucky that I was still able to do my whole book tour here, in the studio we had just built.”

The extensive lockdowns also renewed Kate’s love of Hurstbridge and the wonderful range of culinary treats offered by her favourite local haunts. “We got to know Hurstbridge so much better during lockdown,” she says. “We could go on a quick drive and pick up fresh proteas, lemons, pumpkins, apples and eggs.” As well as this appreciation for her home town, there was comfort to be found in the ever-present, and ever changing, natural landscape. “We were able to spend time watching birds and different flowers come out, exploring and having adventures down by the creek. It was pretty special.”

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