You don't have to be crazy to be a writer
(It does help, though.)

By Peter Macinnis

Biography

Peter Macinnis is a Sydney-based writer. Being no longer able to claim he is a New Kid, he blogs as Old Writer on the Block*. He has two Australian history books at the printer,* Not Your Usual Bushrangers *and* Not Your Usual Gold Stories*, out through Five Mile Press, later this year. He usually works on four books at a time. Right now, he is working on just one thing, something he calls the* Big New Project*: currently at 400,000 words but likely to be larger than* War and Peace*, this is a collection of original Australian historical source material, gathered from the archives, and assembled into a logical order. Because of its size and the need for internal navigation, this will be released as an e-book.*

This story began in a talk I gave at Birrong Girls High, when I used a shot of myself near a lava flow on Kilauea on the Big Island of Hawaii. You could see from the photo that I was sweating profusely, but one of the girls asked about the heat, and I mentioned that it was sufficient to frizzle the hairs on my legs.

The girls were largely NESB, but with the bubbling confidence of young Australians.

'You're mad!' one of them told me firmly. 'You'd have to be!'

I told her of an old and probably apocryphal Chinese curse. 'I'm not mad,' I explained. 'I just like living in interesting times. Interesting is good.'

As a small boy, I knew I would write books one day. As a five-year-old early reader, any books within reach were fair game for me, but after tackling Salmond's *Law of Torts* one morning, I learned to review the available data before choosing my reading.

In the late 1940s, as we emerged from austerity, most books had dust jackets, which contained enticing splashes of colour, and information about the book and its author. I read the blurbs and then, because I wanted to be a writer, I examined authors' life stories.

I suspected that if a writer lacked a background of hair's-breadth escapes,

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desperate acts of derring-do, like quelling a riot with a derringer and a solar topee, they never got published. As I approach advanced middle age, my cynical streak has expanded to a broad band, and I wonder if they made their adventures up, but that came too late to save me.

I knew that I needed to live an interesting life. By the time I left school, I had mastered most of the skills of subterfuge that I might need to prosecute a guerrilla war after becoming an escaped prisoner-of-war. Against that, I now placed a value on my pelt that ruled most of those plans out. I am a good shot with a rifle, but I only shoot at things that don't bleed, scream, or shoot back. That's quite proper for humans, but it might be problematic for guerrillas, so I dropped that idea.

In the early 1960s, my dreams included sailing a lakatoi from Port Moresby to Singapore, but that became submerged in a desire to be a pre- and post-Islamic mediaeval Javanese historian, and I set to work building a bank roll to pay for that.

The 1965 coup in Indonesia, and a consideration of the leftish politics of my Indonesian friends led me to conclude that perhaps this was an unwise ambition, given that leftists were dying, so I made the obvious choice and started a science degree. My thoughts of living an interesting life were put to one side as I threw myself into the riveting mysteries of apical meristems in plants and mesoderm in animals. To save my sanity, I started going bush, and became at least as much a naturalist, and the interesting life was suddenly back on the agenda.

Then one day, I realised that everybody has an interesting life. The difference is that authors make proper use of their interesting lives. My next task was to make the acquaintance of interesting people, and see where that led.

As a botanist, I got work tending the gardens of people who had 'Australian native' gardens, the idea being that I wouldn't mistake the waratahs for onion weed. That gave me the time to tackle two key questions: *what do we mean by interesting?* and *who should I respect?*

In the end, my first answer came down to this: if anything makes me want to run and find out, like Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, then it is interesting. That answered the respect question: *anybody that knows more than I do about anything interesting is worthy of respect*.

Given my highly-developed Rikki-Tikki-Tavi tendencies, that first answer meant that almost the whole world deserved my respect. Later, I discovered that Karl Popper went through a similar bout of introspection while working as a cabinet-maker, but used his time far better.

I am always prepared for troubles when I go bush, either on my own or in a small group. Like those writers of almost a century ago in their biographical notes, I work hard to deliver a good yarn, but I don't really take risks.

Still, my two criteria for *interesting* and *deserving* of respect put me in the way of interesting ideas, and gave me a life rationale as a teacher and as a writer: *provoke them to the point where they want to run and find out*. And that, dear reader, is why I trot off out into the wilderness, seeking provocative things to share with my readers.

In the first years of this century, I got a bee in my bonnet about Australian exploration. My cohort were all taught that Lawson, Blaxland and Wentworth (that was the order in which Macquarie listed them) were the only ones wise enough to head 'up the ridges' (meaning the spurs) to get to the top. We were also taught that explorers went out into trackless wastes.

As *any fule kno,* walking up the spur is always the easiest route, and any bushwalker looking at a mountain always runs an eye up the spur. More to the point, any wilderness walker knows there are traces of past feet out there, pads and tracks that show the way. The explorers knew this and followed 'native roads', especially when they sought water in an arid zone.

Reading up on the old explorers, I came across Harry the Camel, who shot his owner, John Ainsworth Horrocks, and of course I had to Run and Find Out. In 1846, Horrocks had the only camel in Australia, and it looked as though Harry was badly managed, but the only way to test this was to go out with camels and learn the basics of camel management, how to make friends with them, how to hobble them, and so on.

(No, I won't explain how Harry the Camel shot John Horrocks: look it up on Google, but as a side note, while checking that Google has the answers, I discovered that the Charles Sturt Memorial Museum had plagiarised seven pages on Horrocks from my *Australia's Pioneers, Heroes and Fools*. I took two days off from writing this to teach them a harsh lesson, and you may come across an account of that in my blog. I do *pro bono* stuff like this for free, and I happily give

my text to worthy causes like museums, but I equally happily burn thieves.)

While studying camels, I learned that scorpions circle a camp fire at a distance determined by the heat of the fire. Sleep across that circle, and you may get stung, as I have noted in two books, but I don't think I have yet used what happened later that night: it was a full moon, and a pale and ghostly dingo came to visit me as I lay in my swag. I would have used the story if I had been properly prepared.

I should have had my digital camera on and ready, because the dingo had visited two others of the party in the previous 20 minutes, and I knew it would visit me. Instead, when the pale face loomed up, I said certain stern words of dismissal, and missed taking the shot of a lifetime. I won't make that mistake again.

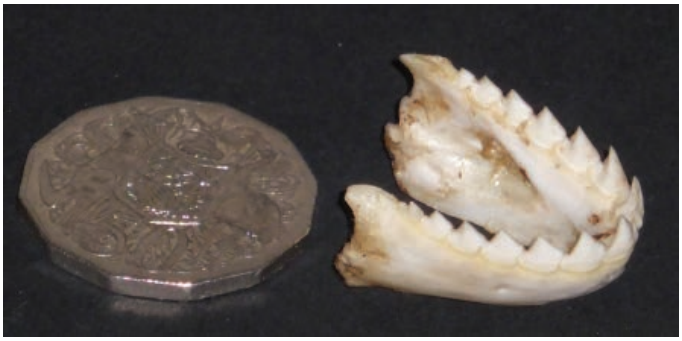
With a science degree, I am always on the lookout for wildlife. I wear soft rubber shoes and walk silently, which can be alarming for the kangaroos I disturb, and not too good for my heart as they thump off into cover. That happened nine times, one day on Mount Exmouth in the Warrumbungles. None of them was a mean old man roo like this one: you need to know the difference!

Some might call my actions that day crazy. I was out on my own, but I had survival gear, I was on a marked track, and I had filed a walk plan. Also, I expected other people to be on the mountain, but they weren't.

All the same, there is crazy, and there is apparently crazy. If I wasn't prepared for the dingo that came to visit, I am always prepared for troubles when I go bush, either on my own or in a small group. Like those writers of almost a century ago in their biographical notes, I work hard to deliver a good yarn, but I don't really take risks.

While catching piranha in the headwaters of the Amazon, a few months ago, I proposed doing a Rex Hunt and kissing the fish before releasing it, and that thought may seep into my writing one day — but my blood never seeped into the Amazon. Look at the lower jaw on the right of the photo below, if you are wondering why. Equally, when I was swimming with hammerheads in the Galapagos, a week later, I stayed five metres above them.

On Thursday Island, we found ourselves



in crocodile territory, where we had gone to examine a dugong jaw, because when William Dampier found one in a shark's belly, he mistook it for a hippopotamus jaw.

Luckily, saltwater crocodile cannot 'gallop' like the smaller and less aggressive freshwater crocodile. Salties can reach speeds of 10 or 11 km/h when they 'belly run'. They go faster if sliding down muddy tidal riverbanks — a sort of a crocodilian toboggan with teeth, but that is downhill on mud.

Uphill and on dry land, the saltwater crocodile, *Crocodylus porosus*, has no chance of catching an active human. In water, it is another matter. The 'salties' can swim faster than us, at up to 15 km/hr, though they rely mainly on being able to surge out of hiding and to grab their prey on the water's edge.

We stayed away from the water, and kept an eye on the sparse vegetation behind the mud, and I assured my wife that if your hand is already inside its jaws, the trick is to reach down for the palatal valve that stops water running into their throats and drowning them. Grabbing this floods their lungs and leaves them unable to continue the attack.

She looked me in the eye. 'I'd like to shake the remaining hand of whoever came up with that one!' she told me, as we proceeded cautiously.

She also wrangles leeches for me, but she drew the line once at poking a funnel-web with a stick to make it rear up and show its fangs, and she mostly leaves the mountains to me.

Like me, she is a biologist, and she stands happily by, pulling ferns aside so I can get a better shot of a tarantula, or holds still as an anaconda slithers over our gum-boots. No, I am not willing to comment on the camera shake in the anaconda shot.

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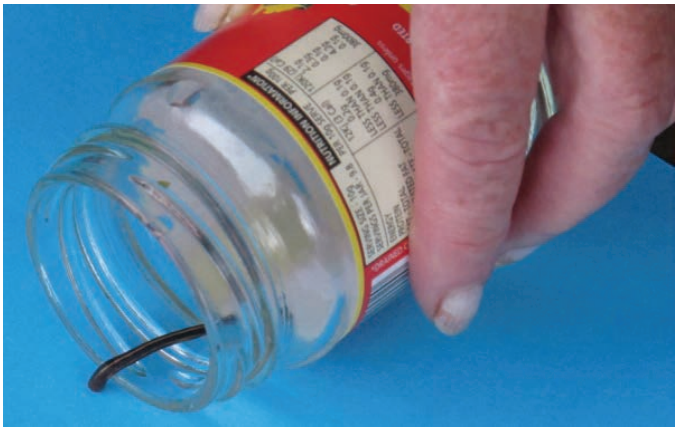
So back to my Warrumbungle mountain; a wedge-tailed eagle was there that day, and it swooped me repeatedly as I worked around a difficult rock face, and I elected not to get the camera out until I was safe.

As soon as I got past the hard bit, it moved away of course, but when I was on the peak, it circled me, always staying in the sun, casting its shadow near or over me and preventing a shot.

Animals are often uncooperative, so plants and rocks are often easier, though when the plants are poisonous, you can still get into trouble. London's Chelsea Physic Garden has many poisonous plants, but I drew odd looks when I asked where they were in 2006. I have written several books on poisons and poisoners and I have been translated into a number of other languages. When I explained my background as a poisons specialist, and mentioned how Jo in *Little Women*, while seeking material for stories '... excited the suspicions of public librarians by asking for works on poisons ...', the severe expressions eased.



Still, that required my looking affable and cuddly. As I get older and more sinister-looking, I have taken to hunting rocks. Pretty much by definition, rocks are out of doors, often in scenic places, and they don't get you into trouble.

Rocks that float are fun, and for the past couple of years, the coasts of NSW have been littered with pumice that came from east of New Zealand, but by the time they washed up here, most of the larger pieces were inhabited.

Chasing those on Myrtle Beach, I recalled that the lowest level of the Sydney Basin was exposed in the cliff behind the beach, so of course we hunted that down. Below, you can see my wife's hand spanning more than 100 million years. One example is never enough, so my sons helped me traipse in, almost to another good exposure, 15 km from the road, in a place we had visited before.

to convict them, after one colleague had been injured, and another had been shown a handgun. I played Mr Bean so well, they sniggered at me and handed over damning papers to the idiot they saw. I wrote a very interesting report.

Then again, I once spent three days displaying two savages in a cage as an art event/hoax. I write history most of the time, and all of the history will be good, but severely misrepresented and invaded by fictional characters.

The falls are close to the town of Meiringen, claimed to be the place where meringues were invented. People who know their Holmes canon will recall that Holmes staged his death at the top of the falls: anybody who visits Meiringen cannot avoid the connection because there are images, signs, statues and more, celebrating Holmes.

I concluded that I could rewrite the area's geography to meet my needs, and I realised that after Holmes disappeared, he accompanied our Australian hero to his home and laboratory, somewhere on the NSW coast, and reverted to the geology. It remains a legitimate expense for taxation purposes!

We went up Mount Pilatus for the rocks, strayed into the wilderness of Heidiland, where I found a perfect setting for the Reichenbach Falls sequences. There was just one danger: the area was completely deserted, and the bus out had been empty, but when we went to board the last bus back, geriatric Switzerland had emerged from the woods and crammed the bus to overflowing. In the end, we fitted in, albeit poked by walking poles, but that was the closest we came to danger in Switzerland.

We came home, and for a while, we concentrated on rocks that push in, making dykes and sills. That isn't too dangerous: you just have to clamber over them, but often the best exposures are on rocky seashores, and that means looking out for blue-ringed octopuses (or octopodes, if you must have a classically correct plural), gaps in the rocks, and waves (plus seals if one is in New Zealand).

It is a curious fact that in Scots English, a dyke can be either a wall or a ditch, but igneous dykes take both those forms, and we chase them. Only once have we found

one where the weathering of the dyke had kept pace with the surrounding rock.

The other danger that I have faced in the quest for material is eating local foods. On one occasion, as a representative of the Australian government (long story), I was constrained to eat part of a dog that I had heard killed while one of my colleagues made a speech. After that, it was a downhill run, and in the past two years, I have eaten foal steak, llama, alpaca and guinea pigs, but I will only be happy when I have tried camel, which is recommended by several early explorers. And rainbow lorikeets, which the old explorers called 'Blue Mountaineers'.

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