

THE FLIGHT OF THE MIND: WRITING AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION CONFERENCE PAPER

Walking into Fiction

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The mid-twentieth century British writer Ivy Compton-Burnett once claimed that she found life 'quite hopeless for books'. What helped her most in the creation of books, she added, was other books. This is true, I believe, for the majority of writers, in that we learn how to write fiction by reading others' work; however, personal experience often provides the initial impetus for fiction, and today I wish to describe how *The Zookeeper's War*, an unambiguously historical novel, emerged from my own personal history.

The Zookeeper's War tells the fictional story of Vera, an Australian woman who in the 1930s marries the Director of the Berlin Zoo, Axel Frey, and spends the war trying to protect the animals from air raids and food shortages—arguably an odd subject for a first-time Australian novelist. Its origins lie in a visit I made to Berlin in 1986 as a 20 year-old backpacker. Having spent the previous nine months travelling and working in different parts of Europe, I arrived in autumn in what was then West Berlin, hoping to find work. In this I failed and began to live off my credit card, embarking on a daily routine of wandering the autumnal streets of West Berlin for hours at a time before retreating to the British Council Library to read.

The West Berlin I discovered on my lengthy walks was compelling, a place of melancholy and menace, which has captivated numerous thriller writers, most notably John Le Carré, and the fall of the Berlin Wall was still three years away. Any sufficiently long walk in one direction would inevitably terminate at the Wall, which not only divided the eastern and western parts of the city but also encircled West Berlin in order to prevent East German citizens taking refuge there, though the best known images of the Wall are of course from the centre of the city, an area made famous by the Checkpoint Charlie border crossing, and for the sandy wasteland that had once been Potsdamer Platz. In 1986 it was possible to climb a wooden viewing platform on the western side of the Wall and survey the space that Potsdamer Platz had once occupied. Beyond a minefield and barbed-wire entanglements stood a series of watchtowers, from which guards swivelled their binoculars onto you, perhaps hoping for a glimpse of a pretty woman or the latest in western fashion. What the guards could not see was the riot of brightly coloured graffiti on the western face of the Wall, from images of superheroes bursting through the masonry to witty slogans, and, at in one case, a heartfelt plea in English about an 11-year-old girl who'd gone missing in Massachusetts. One message, which had been spray-painted in red, declared that 'BERLIN IS IN MY BLOOD, WHICH IS SMEARED ON THIS WALL'. Another, less impressed, visitor had recorded the claim that 'THIS IS NAFF ALL COMPARED TO THE SLAG BANK AT BARROW-IN-FURNESS'.

Soviet-administered East Berlin included the city's old centre, the Mitte, which formed a salient that jutted into West Berlin, and one of the odd legacies of the division of the city was the presence of an underground rail line that routinely carried western commuters beneath the Mitte through a series of dimly-lit and

dilapidated “ghost” stations, which East German citizens were of course no longer able to use. A single functioning station, Friedrichstrasse, provided an entry point for West Germans and others who wished to visit East Berlin, and it was via Friedrichstrasse that I made my one visit to East Berlin. This involved a lengthy passport checking procedure, as well as a compulsory and extortionate exchange of 50 West German Marks for 50 Eastern Marks, which later that day I spent on a bag of Eastern Block groceries. After the commercial clamour and wealth of West Berlin the comparative austerity of the East was evident in an absence of advertising signage, which only served to expose the brutalist architecture that bordered Alexanderplatz, an inhumanly vast expanse which was dominated at its eastern end by a 1970s television tower, Europe’s second-tallest structure, topped with a spherical, all-seeing ‘eye’. Amidst the spiritless modernity I saw older buildings still defaced by machine-gun tracery from the battle for the city that had ended the war 41 years earlier.

Divided Berlin was a city whose history was written with unusual violence on its streetscapes and buildings, and there were other signs of mid-twentieth-century upheavals. According to the terms of the Four-power agreement that had divided the city after the war, military personnel from the occupying powers—the Soviet Union, the USA, Britain and France—had patrol rights across all four sectors, so that in West Berlin it was common to see box-like Trabant cars containing four Soviet soldiers wearing oversized peak caps, while military personnel from the western forces could freely visit East Berlin. On an arterial road in the British sector I saw a British Centurion tank, like half a house on the move, leaving indentations in the asphalt surface of the road, though the war had ended 40 years before and Britain was an ally of West Germany. I have since been told by a military man that my memory of this incident must be mistaken as the tank’s

tracks would have been fitted with a protective tread—either I witnessed a lapse in standard operating procedure or have somehow misremembered; in either case, an interesting phenomenon. It was an incident that inspired a scene in *The Zookeeper's War*, in which Vera witnesses a tank column on the move in Berlin on 20 July 1944, the day of a failed coup against the Nazis after Claus von Stauffenburg's attempt on Hitler's life.

Early in my stay in the city I found myself a bedsitter in Spandau in the western suburbs of West Berlin. I had been there a week when, on my way to the station, I noticed a street tree festooned with shreds of fabric where leaves had recently been. The tree stood in front of a hulking red-brick building which later that day I learned was Spandau Prison, which at the time held a solitary inmate, Hitler's one-time Nazi Party Deputy, Rudolf Hess, who had been spared execution at the end of the war on account of his non-involvement in the Wannsee conference in 1942, where the Nazi hierarchy finalised plans for the Final Solution. Hess had not been present at this infamous meeting for the simple reason that he had fallen, in the most literal sense, in Allied hands after bailing out of a fighter aircraft over Scotland a year before while on a private mission to negotiate peace with Britain, which he regarded as a fellow Aryan nation. By the time of my visit to Berlin, Hess was 92 years old, having been imprisoned, at the apparent insistence of the Soviets, long after the release of other prominent Nazis, most notably Hitler's architect and War Production Minister, Albert Speer. (Hess was found dead a year later in the prison garden, apparently after strangling himself with a power cord, though rumours persist that he was murdered.) The fabric in the tree at the front of the prison turned out to be the remnants of curtains from the gatehouse windows, through which a neo-Nazi had hurled a bomb in protest against Hess's ongoing imprisonment, fortunately without harming anyone. The aspiring writer

in me was galvanised. Of course I had no sympathy for the bomb-thrower's politics, but what the incident gave me was a vivid sense of proximity to the past and to the passions that drove it, and ultimately it was this awareness that encouraged me to write a story set in World War II rather than the Berlin I knew in the 1980s (though my first two published short stories were loosely based on my own experiences in Berlin). When I came to write the novel I knew it would have to be urgent and compelling, a story that smashed free from the coffin of the past.

It is here that the story of the origins of *The Zookeeper's War* becomes less about authorial experience and more about my encounter with books and other historical sources (a full list of which appears in the novel's acknowledgements). The first of these was a documentary broadcast on Radio National in 1991 entitled *You Never Get Tired in Berlin*—a reference to the supposedly invigorating qualities of the Berlin air. The documentary featured a series of interviews with eye witnesses to events that spanned the period from the rise of the Third Reich to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Those voices, and what they described—meals of dandelion leaves in the ruins of Berlin in 1945, brushing the teeth of a horse head destined for the cooking pot—were unforgettable (the latter incident eventually made its way into *The Zookeeper's War*) and set me thinking about a project set in World War II. Without knowing it at the time, I had selected a city whose iconic status gives a substantial boost to any novel that takes it as a setting, though as yet I hadn't found a story that justified my intrusion into territory already occupied by other writers, territory, moreover, which is thronged with potent stereotypes—think of the strutting SS officer, to take one example. To write meaningfully about the Third Reich, to get the tone of ambiguity essential to good fiction, I knew I would need an unusual way into the subject.

In 1993 I read *The Fall of Berlin* by Anthony Read and David Fisher, a World War II history that makes extensive use of interviews with ordinary people, mostly Germans and Russians, who had lived and fought in Berlin towards the end of the war. For a fiction writer the specificity of eye-witness accounts makes them far more useful than more comprehensive military and political histories, since fiction thrives on telling details of the kind that only participants can provide, and it was just such an account, describing the effects of an air raid on Berlin Zoo in late 1943, which gave me the start of a story. Creativity, in the broadest sense, is often a matter of combining or juxtaposing two or more apparently disparate ideas (metaphor itself is precisely this), and the struggles of a zoo in wartime seemed like a promising subject.

Berlin Zoo, as I portray it in the novel, is a city of innocents at the heart of a nation ruled by beasts, though my protagonists Vera and Axel provide the moral ambiguity essential to good fiction by both abhorring and also participating in aspects of Nazi repression. The suffering of the animals is a painful and, I hope, vivid reality in itself, and readers can decide for themselves what greater resonance it may or may not have. For me *The Zookeeper's War* also functions as a cryptic memoir of my experience of 1980s Berlin, a city of surveillance, enclosure and threat.

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