



Two of us

MEG & TOM KENEALLY

Tom Keneally, 80, is an acclaimed writer. His daughter, Meg, 49, a former journalist, works in corporate affairs and as a scuba diving instructor. *The Soldier's Curse* is the first of a series of novels they are writing together.

MEG: Dad has a genuine interest in other people's lives. You get into a taxi and by the end of the ride he knows the first name of the taxi driver's mother, where his children go to school and what his story is. I think that comes from a humane place inside him. He's a genuinely good guy.

An early memory is of Dad coming out of his study in the afternoons and making up stories for my sister and me. We used to treat him like a story vending machine. He would be expected to deliver a well-characterised and perfectly plotted story on the hop. That's just what Dad did. I also recall on Dad's desk this stack of paper, which looked perfect for testing my new crayons. It turned out I was scribbling on the manuscript of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* [Tom's 1972 novel]. It wasn't until he won a Logie and we watched his acceptance speech on TV that I had an inkling he might be a big deal.

I was a self-centred teenager when he was writing *Schindler's Ark* in the early 1980s. I met many Schindler survivors. When one lady visited our home, she pulled up her sleeve and showed me her six-digit Auschwitz number. I was struck how the numbers had been gouged into her arm to cause maximum pain. It was chilling. I recall that to this day if I ever start feeling sorry for myself because of First World problems.

When I was pregnant 17 years ago, I

decided to try writing a novel. I wrote another a year later and in both cases decided I didn't want to take them any further. Then in November 2014 Dad told me he had written 30,000 words of a book, *The Soldier's Curse*, about a gentleman convict in the penal settlement at Port Macquarie. He said, "I've had this in my back pocket for six years. I'm never going to get around to it, but I really want it to get written. How about you and I write it together?"

Editing something by him felt like finger painting over a da Vinci, so initially I was tentative. Then on advice from Dad's agent, I rewrote the first draft. The characters were created by him and the plot was developed between us. I was always phoning or emailing with questions. I said, "Your name's on the cover, so you've got a dog in this fight and I can harass you as much as I want."

Dad has a habit of laughing insanely at his own jokes, which aren't very funny. He feels he got where he is because of good luck, so he's never big-headed. The one exception is Trivial Pursuit. He's very good at it and not afraid to let everybody know.

We both passionately believe in the idea of fairness and social equity, and when it comes to politics we're on the same page. He did a good job of indoctrinating me from birth. We also love walking and a lot of the plotting for *The Soldier's Curse* was

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done on rambles through the bush around Manly, where mum and he live. Once a weekend we'll go for a walk with my 16-year-old son and 13-year-old daughter.

Dad's got an incredible work ethic and I haven't noticed it slowing with age. I've always watched him write, and read the output. It's a privilege to get an insight into what's been such a central part of his life, and to be part of the process is a real treasure.

TOM: Meg was more a watcher than a child who was head-first into the turmoil. She was extremely verbal, and always into books. Temperamentally I could see she was very like me. I think that's why we're able to work together now. I find it hard to batter out 1500 words of a new draft of a novel in a day, and I was always impressed by the speed and fluency with which she could write. I thought, "Wouldn't it be good to get her out of the maw of the corporate world and turn her into something really self-destructive, like a novelist?"

Years ago I had an idea for a series of books about a gentleman convict, who went from penal station to penal station solving murders. In my enthusiasm I had written 30,000 words about Monsarrat, this convict who had studied the classics and who could pass as a gentleman, and got no further with it. I said to Meg, "I can't possibly do this, but it's a series waiting to be made. Would you like to try to write this book? We can write it together."

I feel uneasy that Meg has done so much of the work. I'm quite willing to exploit her because she can write 4000 words a day. It's like in [northern NSW's] Macleay Valley, where I began school with a lot of bare-footed children of poor dairy farmers. You got the sense they had been procreated to do the morning and afternoon milking. I've turned Meg into my equivalent of the dairy milking child.

Her strictness with her teenage children makes me laugh. She's a very loving mother, but she makes them measure up. Meg has turned into my mother a bit. So I send her up for being my mother in front of her kids, and get good fun out of that.

There isn't a lot of conflict, because we're very similar. Our birthdays are only six days apart. We are classic Librans when it comes to making up our minds. She won't make up her mind for fear that she's putting too much pressure on another person to do what she wants to do but, having made up her mind to do something, Meg, although such a gentle person, is ruthlessly stubborn. Therefore throughout her life she has performed above her capacity. I think I actually have, too.

Her scuba diving is characteristic of her determination. She was determined not only to become a master diver but also an instructor. If you knew the reflective, observant little girl, you wouldn't have picked her as a diver, but she loves it.

Meg's incredibly industrious and she's a very exacting researcher. It's just so delightful at the age of 80 to find your daughter wants to do a mad project like this with you. I shouldn't introduce a child to this berserk and unreliable business, but I'm delighted that I have. ■

INTERVIEWS BY
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