

# Page turner

Life Stories

Beaches literary icon Tom Keneally's life has been packed with a richness and depth to rival any of his award-winning novels.

Story by Rosamund Burton

Tom Keneally is sitting at the Bella Vista Café at North Head. He brings out a large photograph album. There is a photograph of director Steven Spielberg and him sitting together during the making of 'Schindler's List', and another of him with Liam Neeson who played Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist who saved more than 1,100 Jews during the Holocaust. The 1993 film that won seven Academy Awards was adapted from *Schindler's Ark*, Keneally's historical fiction novel for which he was awarded the Booker Prize in 1982.

Tom Keneally, who describes himself as the Homebush boy from "the wrong side of the railway tracks", is 90, and still getting 1500 words onto

the page every day. And he is giving the inaugural Thomas Keneally Oration on 19 March at the Manly Writers Festival.

"As a Booker Prize winner, as a Miles Franklin winner, who has written so much - fiction and non-fiction - who is literally a literary icon and an Australian legend, we should honour him by having an oration in his name," said festival founder and chair, Bonita Mersiades. "Tom has lived most of his life on the Northern Beaches, is now a Manly local, and he said he would be delighted to deliver this first one."

Despite being a Manly Warringah Sea Eagles supporter for decades, referred to as their number one fan, living in Manly for the past 18 years, and prior to that for 35 years

in Pittwater, he reckons he's still "considered a blow-in" because he wasn't born in the old Manly Hospital. However, this witty raconteur recounts a few stories about his life on the Northern Beaches.

He was 16 when he first moved here and entered the St Patrick's seminary on Manly's Eastern Hill. "When I was young it was normal that one member of every good Catholic family became a priest, but I was the one who wanted to give it a turn. My girlfriend, when I was at school, was head prefect at Santa Sabina, the local Dominican convent. She becomes a nun, so I think how nice it would be if I became a priest, and we could meet up, in a holy chaste way, rather like Father Tenison-Woods

and Mary MacKillop." He roars with laughter at the thought of it, adding that 16-year-olds should not be allowed to make up their minds about anything.

He did his growing up during his six years at the seminary and as a result says he missed out on the foundation of rock 'n' roll. "I've followed the career of my good friend Peter Garrett and even been to a Midnight Oil concert in New York, but I feel I've been a pretender. I could do him on Hard Quiz, but I couldn't do him as rock 'n' roll."

While training for the priesthood he became aware of some of the issues the church faced, he explains, including the concentration on celibacy, and treating women

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- 51% of the population - "as if they are all potentially dangerous, except for the Virgin Mary and your mother".

"What ultimately did it was that I realised that I wanted to get married." He admits that it wasn't great to tell a girl, when asked what he did for a living, that he used to be a monk, and was now a "ruined priest", the term used for men who had left the seminary. "That's not a turn-on."

But a few years later he met a young woman who was nursing his mother and "chatted her up". That was his cherished Judy and they celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary last year.

Since childhood he has

wanted to be a writer. He began to write short stories and then a novel. When that first novel, *The Place at Whitton*, was published in 1964 he took it as a sign of a writing destiny.

"I was very innocent of what it meant to be a writer and I set out to make a living." He describes himself as "impetuous", wanting to get a book written and out, and openly admits to having a very good work ethic. In 1967 he won the Miles Franklin Award for *Bring Larks and Heroes*; in 1968 for *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*; and is the only author to win the prestigious award in two consecutive years. He has written 40 novels, more than 20 works

of non-fiction, five plays and three screenplays and co-written four mystery novels set in convict settlements with his daughter Meg.

In 1972, Tom and Judy moved to Clareville. "I thought if I was to write, why couldn't it be in the Northern Beaches, which was then rather despised and looked on as too far from Sydney." Koalas lived in the Keneallys' backyard. Tom wrote feverishly every day until 4 o'clock when his young daughters, Jane and Meg, would stand at the door of his study, saying, "story time", and demand that he made up a well-characterised and perfectly plotted story to their liking.

In 1978 the family moved

to a large house on Bilgola Beach, where they lived for 30 years. They were friends with Jervis and Bridget Sparks, who resided in the Keeper's Cottage at Barrenjoey Lighthouse and used to stay there or camp every Easter, carrying their clothes, equipment and an Esky of food and drink up to the headland.

It was while living at Bilgola that he wrote *Schindler's Ark*, interviewing and meeting Holocaust survivors, and accumulating extensive documents, that he realised were not only vital research for his novel, but invaluable archive material. With documents spread around his desk and on a pool table,

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Meg and Tom introducing Meg's son Rory to Bilgola Beach pool in 2000; Tom and Judy climbing the Sydney Harbour Bridge on their wedding anniversary in 2005; the movie based on his book *Schindler's Ark* won seven Oscars at the Academy Awards; Tom's grandfather's general store in Kempsey, NSW; Tom and Judy's wedding day in 1965; at home on the Northern Beaches; with former Manly coach Des Hasler; and the family at Government House, NSW, in 1983 when Tom was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO).





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A very courteous republican – Tom talking to Queen Camilla about her book club in 2024; with director Steven Spielberg during filming of Schindler's List; winning the 1982 Booker Prize; with Liam Neeson, 1993.



Continued from page 43 and bulging reference files, he began writing in May 1981 and finished a year later.

At the end of the 1980s, after his novel Towards Asmara was published, he made a documentary about the war in Eritrea with cameraman, long-time Pittwater resident Ray Henman. Tom, Judy, Ray and two others had left Eritrea and were in Port Sudan, but there had been a coup against the ruler of Sudan so there were no flights in or out.

"It got to the stage that birds were building nests in the airport and camels were wandering around, so we rented a small aircraft. Shit a brick, I didn't expect to live that day. This Beechcraft Baron turned up. The aviation fuel was carried in cans and poured in by hand. The first hour's flying was fine, then we ran into a sandstorm. [The pilot] aborted two attempts to land, was wiping himself with a towel, yelling out 'can you see the ground?'. I said goodbye to Judy. I thought it was lights out. But the clouds

parted and we landed, just as the fuel light came on."

In 2008, Tom and Judy moved back to Manly. They are both walkers and he roams North Head daily. Later he points out what he calls 'Judy's Walk' which starts from near the café and abounds in Flannel flowers.

"I love it up here," he says. "It is a strange mixture of delights. I'm aware it's a place of deaths, of young gays, Aboriginals and convicts. There was a tendency to pitch dead bodies here before sailing into the harbour, the Second Fleet for example. There's an Irish choir out there, a choir of convicts, Aboriginals killed by the smallpox epidemic, and the quarantined people who are in the graveyard a short walk from here."

Currently, Tom has two writing projects on the go. His granddaughter Alex Coverdale is a poet, and he is writing about a grandfather whose granddaughter leaves a poem each week in a particular book and how those poems become part of his reality,

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and her reality becomes part of his reality. Also, he is writing about Mungo Man, the Indigenous Australian who lived 42,000 years ago, and whose remains were discovered at Lake Mungo in 1974.

Innate in Tom is a humanitarianism, the idea of fairness and social equity. He has been a fierce critic of Australia's mandatory detention centres, actively pushing for the release of children and their families, and highlighting the appalling conditions and their psychological impacts. He was a strong supporter of the 'Yes' campaign in the 2023 Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum. At an event at Village Park, Mona Vale, with a crowd of more than 500, he stood alongside then Federal Minister for Indigenous Australians Linda Burney, and Federal Member for Mackellar Dr Sophie Scamps, in support of the 'Yes' campaign performing the rap he had written to encourage a 'Yes' vote.

He has always been a

passionate advocate for the rights of writers. Last year, he fought fiercely against a proposal by the Productivity Commission to amend the Copyright Act in favour of AI tech giants. In the 1970s, he advocated for the Australian Public Lending Right scheme to compensate writers for loss of copyright income due to free library loans. Recently, he's been talking to Creative Australia about ways to increase the sales of Australian authors overseas, and how to support Australia's story talent. "Stories are essential to humans and our writers have been an irreplaceable part of our identity," he says.

*Interestingly Enough* (2015), Stephany Evans Steggall's biography of Tom Keneally, captures the incredible life of this extraordinary Australian. As actor and author Bryan Brown says: "Every country needs a Tom Keneally - but we've got him!"

**\*The Manly Writers' Festival is from 19 to 22 March; more info manlywritersfestival.org.au**

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Life Stories