

NEWS

Nunn unveils secret past of Aussie town

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WITH NINE successful novels under her belt, each one set in a different time and place in Australian history, Judy Nunn believes she has a good grasp of this country and what makes it tick.

The travel nut, who describes herself as "hyperactive", says she wouldn't even contemplate writing a book about somewhere she hadn't spent time and "got a feel of", and when she travels around the country promoting her work, she is determined not to exclude out-of-the-way places.

"I go to very remote regions, we travel in four-seater aeroplanes," she says. "I could put up a map of Australia and I would say there are very few regions that I hadn't called in on . . . you go into that interior and, oh gosh, it's extraordinary."

For the location of her latest novel, Nunn, who grew up in Perth, has chosen a town that may be well-known to many Australians, but one she believes has somewhat of a secret history.

It's also a place that is close to her own heart.

"I've always loved Tassie and I feel like I know Hobart very well because my husband (actor Bruce Venables) comes from there," she says. "It really is the most gorgeous town."

But the real inspiration for *Tiger Men* came from a trip she made to the city a couple of years ago.

"I was walking around Constitution Dock and the council had put up all of these plaques that actually give you an astonishing look at Hobart, not only in the era we all know it but also the era of its heyday," she says.

The city's heyday spans from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, when Tasmania's goods namely merino wool, timber, fruit and jams were prized by the world.

"Tassie actually became known during wartime, when everything was bombed out, as the fruit bowl of Europe," Nunn says.

"I looked at all of this and I thought, 'wow, I don't think anybody has really tackled, from a fiction point of view, the throb of Hobart as a great port of that heyday', which really only lasted about 30 years."

Tiger Men opens in 1853 with the arrival of the last convict transportation ship and, through the lives of three men, the women who loved them and the children they bore, it paints an island of stark contrasts: the wealthy elite in their sandstone mansions, the exploited poor in the city's slum and the villains who haunted the dockside taverns and brothels.

The term "tiger men" refers to the powerful entrepreneurs who at the time were profiting from a paradise rich in natural resources, but is also a double-entendre relating to those who were pillaging the thylacine, or Tasmanian Tiger, to cultivate forested land.

They also wiped out the indigenous populations, and hunted out the seals and right whales.

"The annihilation of the thylacines is a metaphor for what went on with that idyllic island that was so rich in everything that was absolutely plundered," says Nunn, who likes to draw parallels in her books with what's happening in modern Australia.

"The 'tiger men' of today those with a great 'let's ignore the effects this will have on the planet' would have to be the mining industry, particularly in this country," she says, "or those destroying Tasmania's forests."

Nunn has passionate views about the environment, - shown through her subject matters in previous novels (Maralinga, set in South Australia during the British atomic weapons tests, and Heritage, based when migrants from Europe tunneled through mountains and changed the course of a river to build the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric scheme).

But she says, "a little shamefacedly", that she isn't an activist "probably because I'm too busy writing about it and that's my comment".

She remains cagey on the subject of her next book, but reveals it will probably concern the White Australia Policy, which intentionally restricted "non-white" immigration to Australia up until the 1970s.

"I think it's going to rather parallel some of the problems we're going through today. We had great trouble embracing Europeans because we didn't understand them; now we have trouble embracing people of a different ethnicity altogether, of another faith," she says.

These days Nunn writes her books in her wooden house by the water on NSW's lower Central Coast that she and her husband built four years ago after knocking down their "little old holiday shack".

"I was bought up on the coast, I love swimming and boating and anything to do with the sea," she says. "(The central coast) is only an hour-and-a-half from the city but it remains unchanged, which is extraordinary."

The author says she has developed "a huge love affair" with Australia ever since returning from London, where she lived and worked as an actress for five-and-a-half years in the 1950s and '60s.

It's helped, of course, that she has been able to build two hugely successful and very different careers here first as an actress, including 13 years as Ailsa in Home and Away, and then as a novelist.

"Obviously I'm a hard worker," she says. "My husband would say I'm hyperactive and I would agree with that. I also think I must have hit some lucky streak somewhere."

She looks back extremely fondly at her years on the soap, mainly because of what she describes as the "professionalism" and "smooth efficiency" of the show.

"I think we have some of the best cameramen in the world," she says.

But she admits she's never really watched Home and Away other than to ensure she wasn't picking up "bad habits" when she was in it, and now only to check in to see what her "dear" friends such as Emily Symons (who plays Marilyn) and Ray Meagher (Alf Stewart) are up to.

It may be her role as Ailsa that she is still most recognised for, but Nunn says more and more people in Australia and elsewhere approach her on the streets about her books these days, which she "absolutely loves".

Indeed, she says she feels privileged to spread the knowledge of Australia and its history overseas, particularly in Germany where her books are hugely popular.

Some Germans have even taken her Australian fictional history as gospel. In Territory, Nunn's first book to be printed in Germany, the publishers included a map of Australia with the town of Bullalalla not far from Darwin.

"Bullalalla is actually my fictional cattle station but the (German publishers) have kept that map of Australia in the other books they've printed of mine, and I don't really have the heart to say '\look I think you'd better take that off the map'.

"There might be German people getting off the plane in Darwin and saying, 'look, will you take me to Bullalalla'. There's no such place. I think it's absolutely wonderful!"

Tiger Men by Judy Nunn is published on October 19 by Random House Australia, rrp \$32.95.