

# What I Wrote Debra Oswald



# Introduction

This study guide for What I Wrote: Debra Oswald has been written for senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Literature, Theatre Studies and Drama.

What I Wrote: Debra Oswald is a DVD on the Australian playwright Debra Oswald. Dr Tess Brady interviews Oswald and provides a critical introduction to *Dags* (1987), *Gary's House* (1996) *Sweet Road* (2000) *Skate* (2004) *Mr Bailey's Minder* (2005) *The Peach Season* (2007) and *Stories in the Dark* (2008). The DVD also includes an investigation of Oswald's approach to writing for the stage.

What I Wrote: Debra Oswald is one title from a series of DVDs spotlighting Australian playwrights. The series offers students information about the ideas and processes of the playwrights, as well as the opportunity to hear what the writers have to say about their work. Other titles available in the What I Wrote series include:

## Series 1:

- + What I Wrote: Matt Cameron
- + What I Wrote: Louis Nowra
- + What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson
- + What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson

## Series 2:

- + What I Wrote: Joanna Murray-Smith
- + What I Wrote: David Williamson
- + What I Wrote: Andrew Bovell



The DVDs are available from Ronin Films, <http://www.roninfilms.com.au>

Further information about the series and film trailers can be found at: <http://www.whatiwrote.com.au> or on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/pinkcat1>

The play scripts are available from Currency Press, <http://www.currency.com.au/>

## About the Filmmakers

### Dr Tess Brady *Presenter*

Dr Tess Brady is a highly respected editor, researcher and teacher of writing at university level. She was the co-founding editor of the international online scholarly journal *TEXT* and has published children's picture books, adult radio drama, crime fiction, short stories and popular non-fiction. Her most recent publication is *Creative Writing: Theory beyond practice*, with Nigel Krauth.

### Catherine Gough-Brady *Director*

Catherine Gough-Brady is a documentary maker. She has made works for a variety of media. This includes radio features for the ABC, educational videos, online

interactive websites and advertising. She is currently working on Series 3 of What I Wrote, which includes an interview with Ray Lawler. You can find out more about her by visiting <http://www.snodger.com.au/catherine/>





## About Debra Oswald

Debra Oswald is a Sydney-based playwright and author. She began writing as a teenager and her first play was workshopped at the Australian National Playwrights Conference when she was 17. It was later broadcast on ABC Radio. Since then she has made her living as a writer for film, television, stage and radio, as well as publishing a number of novels for children.

Debra has written extensively for the theatre and is best known for her play *Dags*, which has had many productions both in Australia and overseas. Her other plays include *Sweet Road*, *Gary's House*, *Mr Bailey's Minder* and *Peach Season*. Her prize-winning youth theatre play *Skate* toured to Belfast in 2005. *Stories in the Dark* won the 2008 NSW Premier's Literary Award and the 2008 AWGIE Award (Theatre for Young Audiences).

Her television credits include *Palace of Dreams*, *Bananas in Pyjamas*, *Police Rescue*, *The Secret Life of Us* and various dramas for ABC TV Education.

Debra is also the author of the children's novels *Me and Barry Terrific*, *The Return of the Baked Bean*, *The Redback Leftovers* and *The Fifth Quest*, as well three Aussie Bites — *Nathan and the Ice Rockets*, *Frank and the Emergency Joke* and *Frank and the Secret Club*.

More about Debra Oswald's publications can be found at her publisher's site: <http://www.currency.com.au/search.aspx?type=author&author=Debra+Oswald>

## The Writer's Context

Debra Oswald writes about the abandoned and neglected child and how that child becomes a wounded adult. At the core of her plays is the need to belong and the love that brings. She is deeply interested in the psychology of the family, real or surrogate, and how it can nourish, heal and make person whole.

- As you view *What I Wrote: Debra Oswald*, compile a list of statements that describe Oswald's compassion for the abandoned child and that child's search for belonging.
- Oswald has written adult characters who as children suffered from abandonment. It has left them damaged, struggling, trying to find the love and warmth of home. Brady claims there is a child in all of us that needs nurturing. Do you agree? Discuss with others in the class.
- Oswald explains that meeting orphaned children as a schoolgirl fuelled her interest in the abandoned child. Does a writer need to experience or observe such emotions first hand in order to write about them? Discuss with others in the class.
- Using the DVD as a source, make a list of ways Oswald uses observation of people and situations to research her plays and writing.
- Use the internet, critical essays and commentaries to compile a detailed summary of the contexts that shape Oswald's work as a playwright. Discuss your findings with others in the class.
- Oswald is interested in the power of storytelling to generate hope in a world that can seem bleak and desperate. Working in a group, take one of her plays and trace the way she instils hope into the bleakness of her characters' world. Make a *hope* diagram. What emotion would you put at the beginning and at the end of such a chart? Or is it a circle?





# Views and Values

- Drawing on *What I Wrote: Debra Oswald* and your knowledge of the play you are studying, make a list of the issues that Oswald has brought to audiences' attention.
- Do you think Oswald's plays have the power to move the audience into a deeper understanding of themselves and others? Do we identify with the characters or is it the story which captures our imagination, or both? Discuss in class.
- In many of her plays Oswald has used the building of a structure as a metaphor for the resilience of humanity. Make an outline of a short play or story in which an emotional obstacle is overcome alongside the construction of an object. Perform or tell this.
- At her core, Oswald is an optimist. Form teams and debate: *Optimism is a tool for social change not social folly?*
- All plays are about change; Oswald is more interested in personal rather than political change. Drawing on the play that you are studying, create an annotated visual display that explores Oswald's portrayal of change.
- Complete a detailed analysis of one of Oswald's wounded adults or abandoned children. Notice how she tempers the bleakness with humour and hope. Turn your analysis into a monologue in which the character articulates his or her views and values.

## Critical Perspectives

- Search through the newspapers for the theatre review pages. Make a copy of three or more reviews. List the kinds of things the reviewer commented upon - plot, acting, direction, etc. Are there differences between the reviews? Is one more informative than another? Is a review of a new play different from a review of a well-known play? What would you like to see in the review but which is missing? Discuss the role of a reviewer.
- Go to a live performance of a play. Now write, in point form, the kind of review you think would be helpful to other students. Discuss what you would include and leave out if you were only allowed three points.
- Use the internet, critical commentaries and reviews to arrive at a detailed knowledge and understanding of the critical reception of Oswald's playwriting. What viewpoints do you support? What viewpoints do you refute?
- Oswald isn't afraid to break with convention, in form, characterisation or plot. Discuss with regard to one of Oswald's plays.



# Analytical Responses

The following topics could be used for written text responses, debates, panel discussions and online forums.

- Oswald's characters are ordinary people struggling with their own sense of loss. Discuss.
- In the end the world is not fair, the meek do not inherit the earth. Discuss.
- There is a fine balance between an intruding and over-powerful set design, and one that enhances the metaphors of the play. Discuss.
- Myths and fairy stories are powerful maps of the modern emotional world. Discuss.



## The Writing Process

- 'Reality is so much weirder than anything you could think up sitting in your room.' Oswald. Drawing on Oswald's statements in *What I Wrote: Debra Oswald*, discuss how she researches her playwriting.
- Character development is at the heart of Oswald's success as a playwright. From viewing the interview *Script to Stage*, discuss how she develops her characters.
- Are you surprised to learn that Oswald has problems with confidence? Debate the merits of confidence and doubt in the writing process.
- Oswald describes her card method for solving a structural problem. Take a story or play you are working on, but are not yet happy with, and using this method, re-work the structure. Discuss how useful this method was for you.
- Oswald uses notebooks. She jots down overheard conversations and thoughts. Other writers have

scrapbooks of newspaper clippings. Others collect objects they have found in the world – a stone, a drink coaster, a piece of wire. Analyse your own process. What, if anything, do you collect, and how valuable is that to your thinking and planning process? Share this with the class.

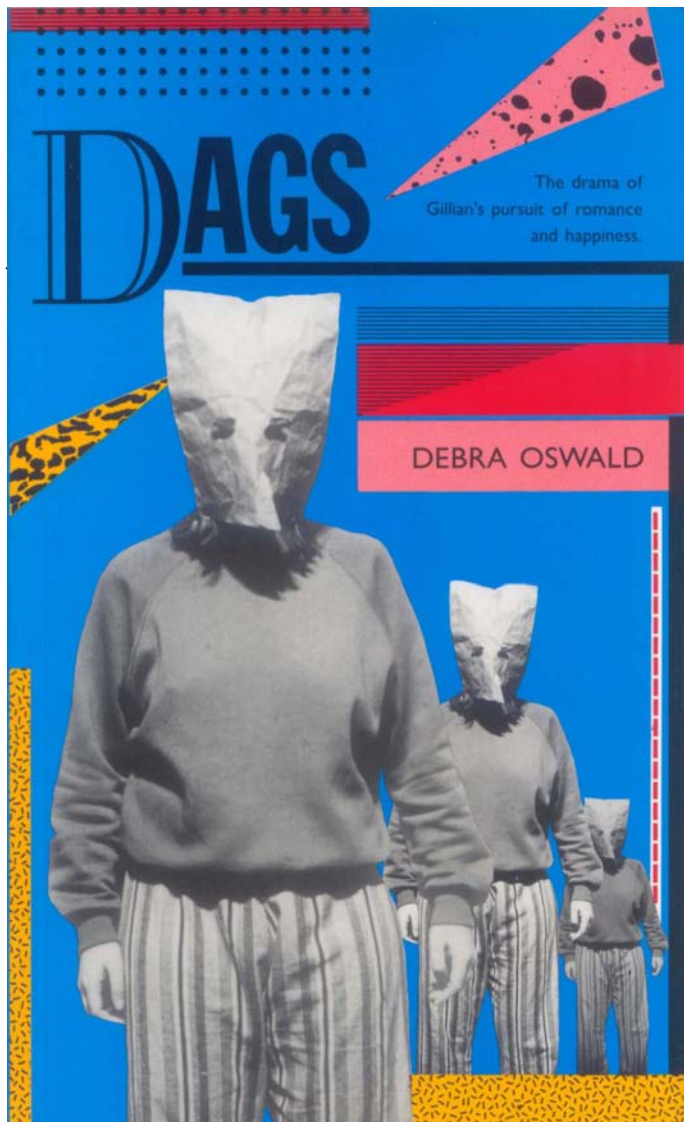
- 'I'm interested in how people make a family out of what they have.' Oswald. Examine two of Oswald's plays to test the validity of this claim.



## From Script to Stage

- Create and present a short solo performance from one of Oswald's plays. Submit a short written report that describes and analyses the processes used to create and present the performance.
- Are you surprised by the commission process for a new play, and how long it takes? Might this be a reason for actors and playwrights to set up their own companies? In your area find out about the local theatre companies that are not mainstream. What kind of plays do they perform?
- 'Change a play in any way that makes it work for the audience.' Oswald. Discuss.
- Oswald explains how re-writing happens at rehearsal, and even after early performances. Is a play ever finished?
- Explore the relationship between the audience, the actors and the play. Is it a static or fluid relationship? On what does it depend?





## Dags

Gillian is in high school and feels there is no point to life - she is ugly and fat and unloved. She has a crush on the spunk of the school, Adam. He begins to notice her when their school bus breaks down and he wants to talk to her about his failing relationship with Karen, the school-dumb-beauty. Gillian accepts the offer to go out on a shared date so that Adam can talk to her about the film while he cuddles up to Karen.

Gillian's older sister, Bronwyn, coaches her on how-to-get-her-man. First she goes out with her sister's boyfriend's daggy brother, Derek, so they can both get over the 'first date, first kiss' scenario. Then she goes through the ugly duckling transformation.

At the school party Gillian arrives looking great. Adam and Karen have split up and he tries to pick her up - but she says, "I wouldn't want an up-myself mindless conceited bore like you." (p66) So in her transformation she rejects the Hollywood idea of the teenager and instead opts for her own integrity and worth.

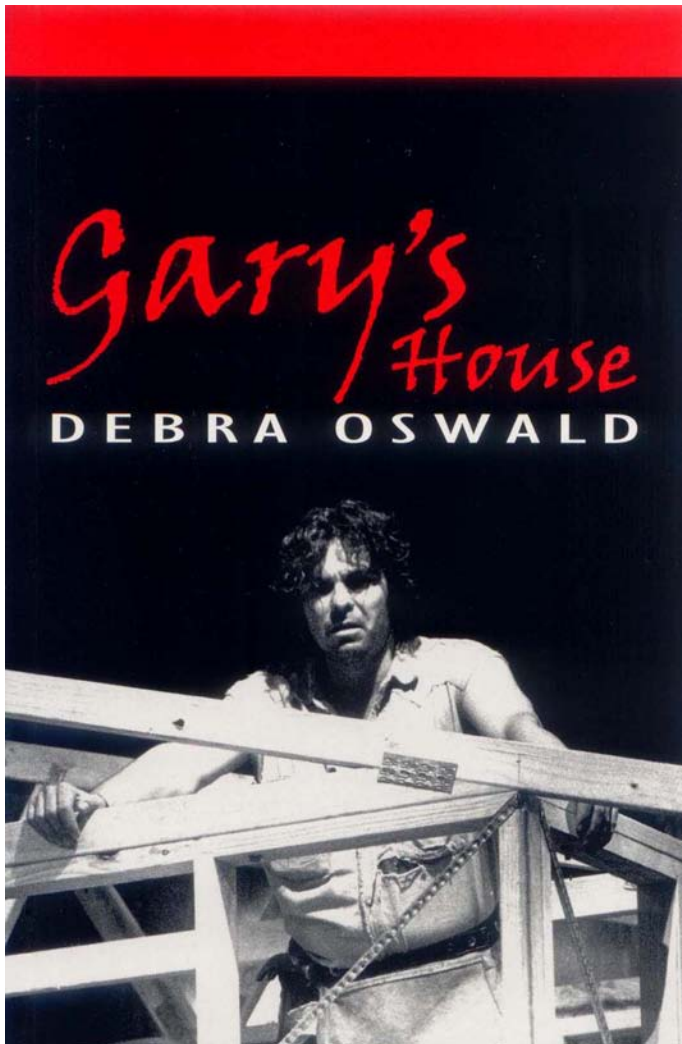
The play uses lifeless dummies for extra characters, including the mother and father and other school kids. This is an interesting dramatic device because in Gillian's mind they *are* dummies.

The whole play is from Gillian's point of view and she often speaks directly to the audience.

### Discussion

- Watch the video interview on *Dags* (DVD 2). Does everyone think they are an ugly duckling? Were you surprised to hear of how much of Oswald's own life was used in researching this play?
- In class do a reading of the play. What were your favourite scenes? Why?
- Humour and sympathetic language are used to portray life as a teenager. Drawing on pertinent quotations from *Dags*, discuss the play's portrayal of life as a teenager. How close to the mark is it?
- The play is very much Gillian's story. Choose one of the other characters and write a scene from that character's point of view.
- Gillian turns Adam down. Was this the ending you expected?





## Gary's House

Gary is building a house for his pregnant girlfriend, Sue-Anne. His sister turns up and puts a spanner in the works by saying she will sell the land. The girlfriend leaves, planning to have the baby adopted. Gary is devastated by this because it reminds him of his own unhappy childhood. At the end of Act 1 he shoots himself.

His sister, Christine, feels guilty and continues to build the house. Sue-Anne with her baby returns and Christine looks after them.

Sue-Anne decides to marry a local lad, Vince, and move out with the child. Christine is devastated. She tries to destroy the house and leaves. When Christine returns, Dave, the neighbour, is finishing the house off – repairing the damage she created in her rage.

Dave and Christine become a couple.

The play ends with Sue-Anne and Vince visiting Dave and Christine and Gary's ghost appearing in the door of the house.

The main issues in this play are character and set and how they relate to each other. Dave, who is afraid of commitment, lives in a shed next to a burnt-out shell of a house. Gary wants to build a *home*, and so he builds a *house*. Christine destroys it and re-builds it. Building, emotionally and physically, is the key metaphor in the play.

### Discussion

- Watch the video of Oswald talking about *Gary's House* (DVD 2). Were you surprised to hear how long it took Oswald to research and write the story of Gary?
- Why do you think Oswald feels emotional about the character of Gary?
- Read *Gary's House*. What are your favourite scenes? Take one scene and in a small group perform a rehearsed reading.
- Killing off the lead character, Gary, by the end of Act 1 and having him re-appear as a ghost at the end of the play is controversial. Oswald says it has a 'theatrical logic'. From watching the interview and reading the play, why do you think Oswald chose that solution? Use a power-point demonstration to argue your case.
- *Gary's House* has two main theatrical components, character and sets. Draw a storyboard of the set and characters as they change over the scenes.
- One definition of a set might be: *Anything that is placed in the performance space during a performance*. Do you agree?
- Gary has to learn social skills as if they were a foreign language. Investigate anger management techniques and, in groups, give a presentation on this, using both quotations from the play and material from other sources.







## Sweet Road

Many dysfunctional or damaged people make their way to an outback location.

- Carla and Andy are on their way to the dream of a better life, but Andy gambles their dream away.
- Frank is running away from grieving his wife's death.
- Jo is running blindly towards revenge for her broken marriage.
- Yasmin, photographing the moment, runs towards her ideal of love.
- Michael hides from his grief and self blame for his son's death.

It floods and all these characters are brought together. The flood stops their movement but at the same time it allows them to change direction, to see and take new options.

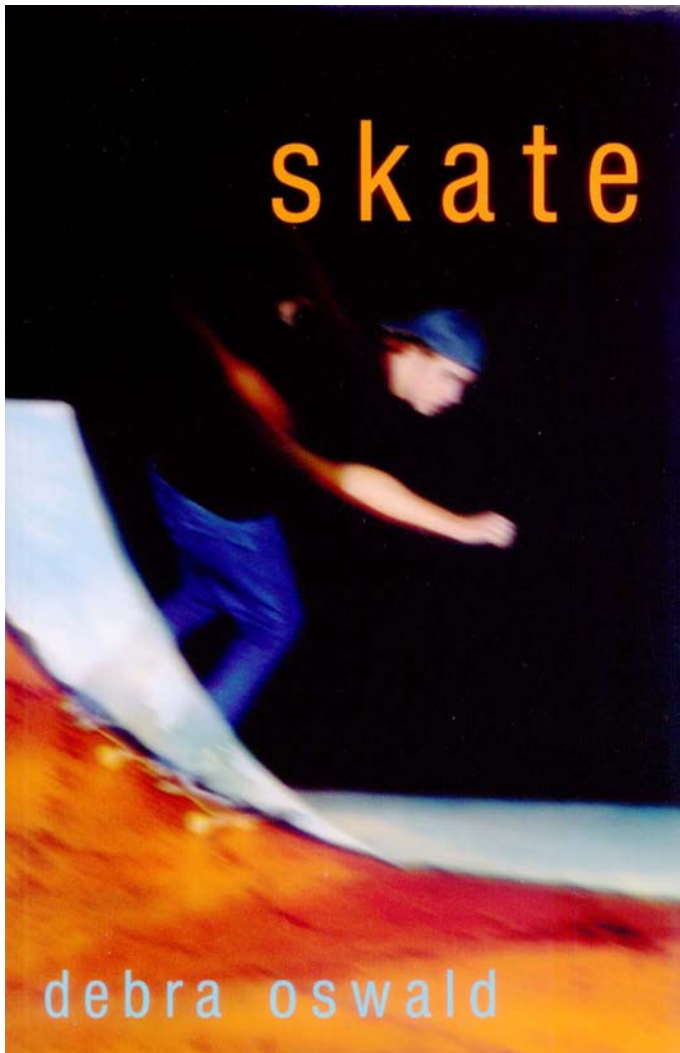
Oswald makes good use of humour particularly in the juxtaposition of the euphoric Yasmin against the avenging Jo.

### Discussion

- Watch the video clip on *Sweet Road* (DVD 2). Why do you think Oswald has a soft spot for the character of Frank?
- 'Life is very funny. I don't know how you could write a play without humour in it.' Oswald. Discuss.
- Oswald's characters are flawed but that is what makes them human. Take one of her characters and compile a profile. Use moments and statements from the play to describe and explain the character's nature and behaviour.
- The flood awakens opportunity rather than destroys it. Discuss.
- There is an evocative passage where Jo re-tells her childhood memory of setting off on a holiday. Read the passage on page 64 of the text and research a similar moment from memories, shared family stories and snaps. Write it as a monologue.
- The idea of the journey as a metaphor for solving a human problem is prolific in literature, film, plays and spiritual and psychological texts. Oswald says: 'Shifts can happen on the journey.' Give a power-point presentation of the metaphor of the journey as developed in this and one other text.







## Skate

A group of high-school kids in a small town, Narragindi, want a skateboard park. The council stops them at every turn. Zac is the hero and his mum, Gail, keeps the cause alive, even when Zac has lost faith. Eventually the council backs down and the park is built.

In the meantime one of the kids, Corey, from a dysfunctional family, is shot by his stepfather while trying to protect his mother. The three die in a murder-suicide.

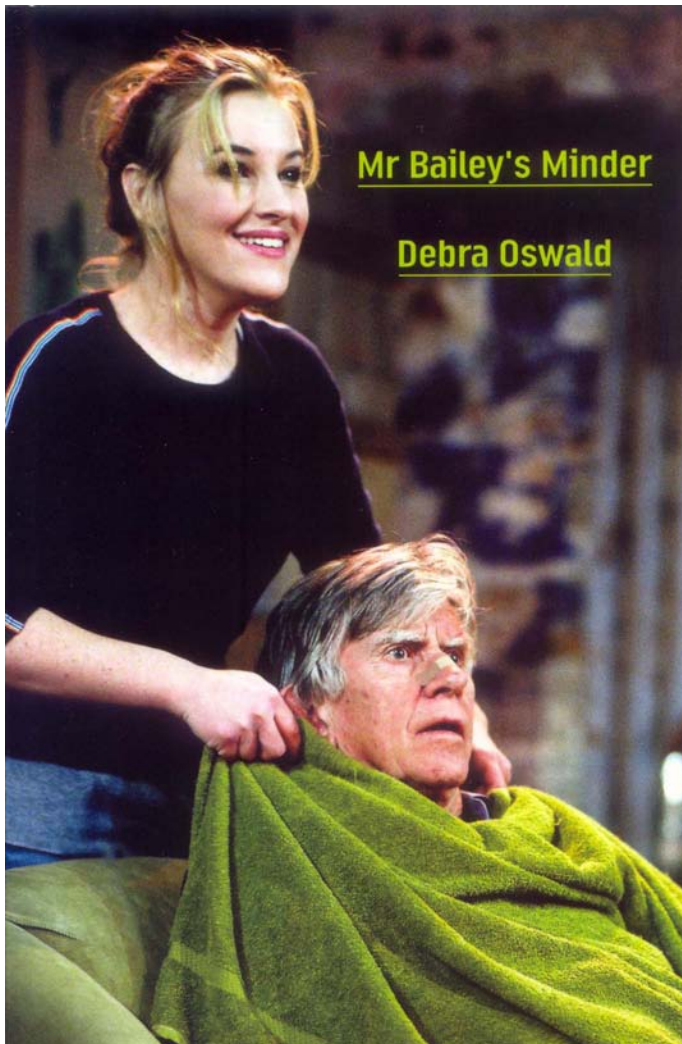
The strength of this play is in its honesty and the characters who are the kind of kids you'd get in such a group – the giggle girl, the guy who talks about skating but doesn't do it, the hero, the groupies. It is honest because everything doesn't work out neatly in the end.

### Discussion

- Watch the video interview on *Skate* (DVD 2). In it Oswald says: 'The more honest you are about your feelings the better you will treat people.' What does Oswald mean by this and do you agree?

- Read the play *Skate* in class. Take one character and write a profile. Include a storyboard of the full costume and look of the character.
- This play is about creating social change – the kids want a skate park and need to convince the local council to build it. Outline the steps taken to achieve their aim and who was involved at each turn.
- Investigate the development of a public resource for youth in your area and the role of the community and council in the planning and building of it. Include interviews with key personnel.
- We see Oswald's neglected child in Corey. Why did the story of his death change over time and people begin to talk about him as part of the problem rather than the hero?
- Using multi-media, give a presentation on skateboarding – the boards, the ramps, its language, music, clothes, moves and history.
- Skate has a very simple set. Oswald says: *It was just about the basic stuff; actors telling the audience a story.* From reading the play and watching the interview do you think Skate's success comes from the simplicity of its setting, allowing the power of the story to take over?
- Debra Oswald describes the play as '...a story about friendship, about prejudice and the power of perseverance. And about the moment when it really hits you in the guts that life isn't always fair.' Do you agree?
- Oswald talks in the interview about her admiration for boys and how they can communicate without too many words. In groups, find an extract from the play which illustrates this. Either perform it or explain how you would direct such a passage.





**Mr Bailey's Minder**

**Debra Oswald**

## Mr Bailey's Minder

Leo Bailey is at the end of his life. He is known as the most famous living Australian artist but he has become an alcoholic. He needs a fulltime carer and he won't leave his house, which is remote and falling down. He has been married several times and his first daughter, Margo, a banker, looks after his affairs. She employs Therese as a live-in carer. Therese is just out of jail and isn't in awe of Leo. She is exactly the right person to look after him. They eventually get on well and he, for a time, stops drinking and becomes a nicer human being.

There is an odd jobs bloke, Karl, who befriends them, and a short appearance from Gavin, who is ripping Leo off – he comes with bottles of alcohol and gets Leo to sign blank pieces of drawing paper which he'll use in an art fraud. Leo isn't aware of the fraud, or doesn't care.

Pieces of the house are removed because Leo has drawn on them and made them into valuable art works. And at the same time he has hidden drawings and paintings in the walls of the house. These are gradually revealed.

The denouement is gripping. After Leo has died, in the

final few moments of the play, Margo takes a painting from a tube. It is his famous lost painting, "Laughing Girl" which he'd hidden. The painting is of her. Alone she looks at it, transfixed, because in that moment she realises that her father did love her after all.

The core question of the play is: *Does making great art excuse otherwise dreadful behaviour?*

### Discussion

- Oswald's *Mr Bailey's Minder* explores the father-daughter relationship, not as an example of a healthy relationship but as one that, at best, has trainer wheels, and at worst is not working. Do you agree?
- From watching the video interview, were you surprised to learn how long it took for the play to be picked up by a theatre company and how it changed when Oswald cut out a character? If you were the artistic director of a theatre company what criteria would you use to commission a new play? Discuss.
- In Oswald's *Mr Bailey's Minder* we are asked: 'Is it acceptable to treat people badly if you produce wonderful art - should everything be sacrificed for the art?' Hold a debate on this topic.
- Oswald makes use of the archetype of the father and the artist. Research the concept of archetypes and by using pertinent quotations from the play illustrate their use within the text.
- In Oswald's *Gary's House* a house was built on stage; in *Mr Bailey's Minder* a house is being pulled down. Use a flow chart to illustrate the destruction of the house as metaphor. Make a storyboard of the changing set.
- Take your favourite scene or part of a scene and perform it. Explain why you chose that sequence.
- "This is a play about demolition - Here the edifice had to be pulled down so that we could at last see the love." Oswald. Do you agree?



# The Peach Season



DEBRA OSWALD

## The Peach Season

Celia has a peach farm with ripening peaches and no pickers. Her older friend, Dorothy, helps in the packing sheds with Celia's daughter, Zoe. Dorothy's son is a lawyer and calls by from time to time. He brings to the farm two drifters who need cash quickly and who will pick the crop. They stay in the shanty on the property. They are the older sister, Sheena, and the younger brother, Kieran.

Zoe and Kieran fall in love – they take Sheena's car and elope. Celia is beside herself and searches for them everywhere – the peach farm goes to ruin. Celia eventually comes back and hides in her house, refusing to come out.

Kieran and Zoe end up in Sydney in the drug underworld and get mixed up in a bungled robbery where a girl is killed. On the run, Kieran turns up at the farm, hiding in the shanty. He is discovered, and with his help Celia is re-united with her daughter Zoe.

Kieran then turns himself into the police, taking all the blame for the things he and Zoe did while on drugs...

but Zoe won't let him take all the blame.

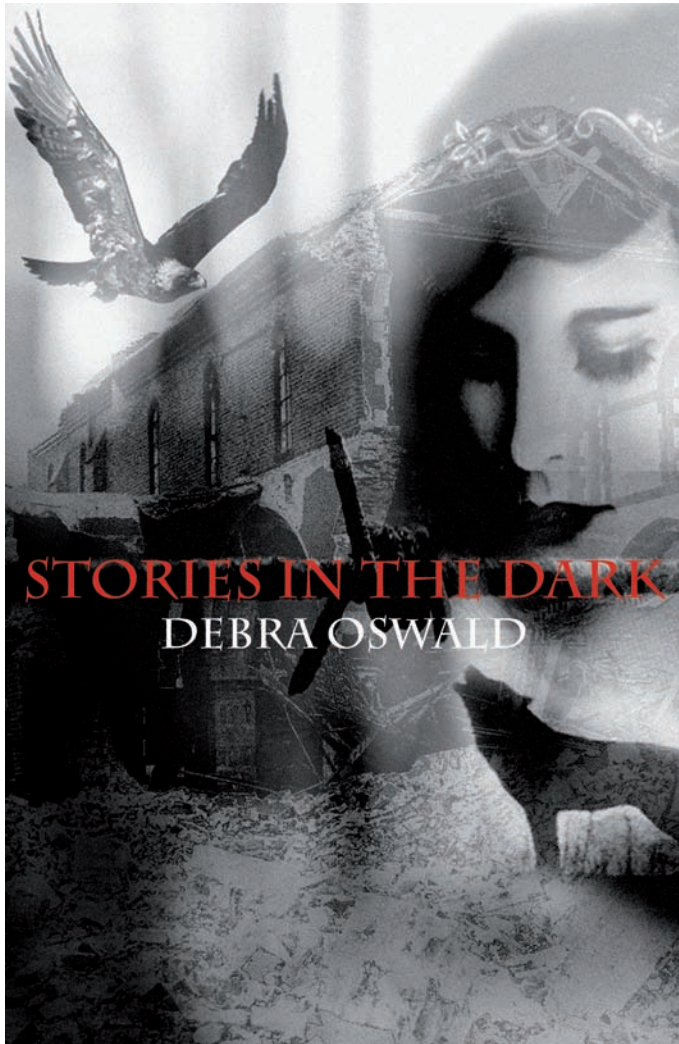
It all ends well. There is a fine harvest and the normal pickers are back. Zoe is given a good behaviour bond and is at school in Sydney, coming home for the summer. Kieran spent a little time in jail but is on remand and is heading to Northern Territory to look for work and clear his head.

A core issue in the play is the relationship between the mother and the daughter. Celia has to learn to love without possessing her daughter, without smothering her.

In *Mr Bailey's Minder* Oswald makes use of archetypes. Here in *The Peach Season* she uses myth. The characters play out events which echo the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The myth acts like a soundtrack to move the play along. We know, in the back of our brains, how the story will unfold and we are waiting for the denouement. When it comes we are revealed, 'Ah, yes of course,' we hear ourselves say.

### Discussion

- In the video interview Oswald says: 'The desire to explore the darker side of life is part of growing up.' Do you agree?
- Research the myth of Demeter and Persephone. In a powerpoint presentation show how the play re-works this myth.
- All of the characters in *The Peach Season* have lives away from the play. Take one character and write a scene depicting part of that life.
- As a designer, how would you depict the changing state of the farm in *The Peach Season*? Use a storyboard to illustrate this.
- Oswald used the Sydney drug scene to hint at Hades, the underworld. Discuss what other locations, in a modern play, might equally serve as hinting at Hades?
- Who has learnt more at the end of the play, Zoe or Celia?



## Stories in the Dark

In a war-torn city Anna (16 going on 105) finds a safe place to hide at night. She discovers Tomas (12) has crept into her hiding place during the day. Tomas is new to the city, disoriented and scared. Outside the war rages and we hear mortar fire and snipers.

To keep Tomas quiet once the lights fail, Anna tells him a story. At first she struggles to remember a story and then it comes to her, and the story-telling becomes a nightly ritual. But the stories do more than comfort Tomas, as the play unfolds we realise that they provide hope.

The horrors of war are ever present.

The play ends with one last story. Tomas makes up the story of Anna's escape. We know it is too fantastic and that Anna will probably perish. In this last story we are shown the full power of the pathos of the play.

There is humour as well. As the stories are told, actors come on stage and act them out... but the actor has to perform *exactly* what the children say. As the children

fumble with the story, sometimes forgetting it, the actors also fumble, change, swap roles or are stranded on stage.

The mixture of hope, horror and humour make for a profound and deeply moving play in which Oswald's lost and abandoned child comes in from the cold.

### Discussion

- In groups, choose a scene from the play and perform it for the class. Explain why your group chose that particular scene.
- In the video interview Oswald says: "There are mysteries which we can only glimpse through the folds of story?" Discuss.
- Research the stories of any war-torn city in history. In a powerpoint display show both the destruction of the city, and also the extraordinary lengths people take to keep humanity alive. Humanity here can be seen as moral code, culture, personal dignity, etc.
- Research a story you were told as a child, re-write it, or draw it on a storyboard, and illustrate what the story tells us of the human struggle and determination to survive.
- *Stories in the Dark* uses a powerful mixture of horror, humour and hope. Discuss.
- In the video interview, what does Oswald mean when she says: 'Story is the antidote to opinion'?
- In *Stories from the Dark* Oswald has brought the abandoned child in from the cold. Do you agree? Discuss.





# Candid Interviews with Australian Writers



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