

VARUNA

The National Writers' House

May Monthly Feature

Alumni Interview: Jo Riccioni, author of *The Italians at Cleat's Corner Store*

Congratulations, Jo, on the publication of your debut novel. It's been garnering quite a bit of notice; I've happened upon several positive reviews in the press. That must be thrilling, seeing your novel out there and being discussed: tell us a bit about being a literary debutante!

Thanks Di, but I feel less like a literary debutante than a "debut aunt", you know the middle-aged, second-wind variety? I don't mind too much. I'm in good company. I didn't have the confidence or the patience to write when I was younger. I was too busy reading and being in awe of other people's work. Of course, it's pretty special to hold your own book in your hands for the first time, at any age, especially in print form. I thought we might be fully electronic by the time my novel ever saw the light of day!

You've been awarded a Varuna Residency (for the Cate Kennedy and Robin Hemley short story workshop) and a Varuna Fellowship (for the novel); to what extent has Varuna assisted your development?

Both my Varuna stays were very important to me, not just for the obvious time away solely to write and think, but because of the confidence the awards gave me as a beginner writer and the connections I made with other writers. Writing's a lonely old business and yet there's so much to be gained from insightful group discussion about the craft, not to mention a bit of general "kitchen camaraderie" from people who've tethered themselves to the same yoke. I was lucky enough to experience that during both my stays, as I was resident with some really talented writers who happened also to be friendly and generous. Aside from all that, I reckon Sheila alone afforded me an extra 500 words a day, just because I wasn't obsessing about making meals. (Maybe that's just an Italian thing?)

I interviewed Varuna Alumna Sarah Price recently, who's won a Faber Academy scholarship. You completed the Faber Academy course yourself, and in fact *The Italians at Cleat's Corner Store* is the first novel to be published from the Sydney course (is that right?!); tell us about that and how much completing the course assisted the end result.

I can tell you lots of great things about the Faber course that you probably already know: the weekly meetings that keep your head 'inside' your book, that set you serious deadlines for your writing and that allow you to meet other

writers and form feedback groups; the tutorials and guest lectures on craft and the business of being a writer by practitioners at the top of their game. All of these things can be incredibly helpful when you're working blind on a draft, "wrestling that greased pig in the dark" (I think I'm misquoting Margaret Atwood there). But as far as the end result is concerned, no one's going to actually write the novel for you: it's just you and 95,000-odd words. I can tell you something this course did for me, personally, in terms of the end result, though, because it was one of those wonderfully practical things that often get overlooked in the endless debate about whether writing can be taught. Very early on, James Bradley, my course tutor, set my group the seemingly innocuous task of writing a blurb for our books. I had about 30 000 words of raw material at this stage, and while I thought I knew roughly what my novel was about, I laboured and laboured over that bloody blurb and synopsis. Of course, what the exercise was forcing me to do was pin the book down, boil it to its bones until I understood what it was really about. Writing the blurb also meant turning myself into the reader of my own book. Yes, I wanted to write this novel, but would I actually want to buy and read it? Some writers and writing teachers might find an exercise like this confronting or limiting at an early stage, but it was not supposed to be prescriptive. Of course our synopses could change. But what it did for me was give me something to fall back on during those vague early days when I'd go to the desk thinking, "I don't even know what this novel's about anymore." I'd get my little blurb and I say, yes I do, I know roughly what I'm aiming for, anyway. And I felt anchored to something real. As it turns out, my blurb changed very little from that early exercise as part of the Faber Academy.

Your website bio mentions that the novel was signed to Scribe early in its development – how fantastic. How did that come about?

I'd already been contacted by Aviva Tuffield, who was with Scribe at the time, about a possible short story collection based on a few published pieces, so I was really working on short fiction with that in mind. Then a friend in my writer's group who'd seen very early snippets of my novel said she'd signed up for the Faber Academy and thought I should join her in an attempt to get my novel idea going again. When Aviva found out I was playing with a novel, she asked to see what I had and that's how, much to my amazement, it got signed before it was finished.

So, there was no conflict between attending the Faber Academy, run out of Allen & Unwin, and your contractual obligations to Scribe? I erroneously imagined A & U would have first dibs...

When you enroll with the Faber Academy, it's made clear that the course does not guarantee publication. But at the end of it, the Academy makes a student anthology of sample work available in hard copy and free online, so it's open pickings for publishers and agents. Of course, A&U have the opportunity to speak to writers first because they get to see the work first. In my case, I decided to sign with Scribe part way through the course as I'd been approached by them about my stories before I joined the Academy, I liked their authors and respected the kind of books they'd put out, and I thought I could work well with them. I also I felt I was the type of person who needed that contract (and all its attendant

pressures) to make me focus full-time on the novel and take myself seriously as a writer. It was a slightly nerve-wracking thing to do and I was warned about doing it, but I had a patient editor who was prepared to take a gamble and I felt that might be a rare find in publishing these days.

You've twice been published in *Best Australian Stories*, both in editions edited by Cate Kennedy. Were those stories written and/or workshopped during that short story week at Varuna? How helpful have these sorts of connections and peer participation been in your creative development?

Here's how it happened: I always go to the SWF and after my story placed second in *The Age*, I went up to Cate Kennedy, whose work I've always loved, and said, "Hi, can you sign my copy of *Dark Roots* and, by the way, I've got this story ...?" (Still can't believe I actually did that). And Cate, being the very generous person she is, said, "Yeah alright." And she liked it enough to put it in the collection. Then I was selected by Varuna for the short story workshop and I met her for real. I worked on several stories over the course of that week. One of them I workshopped with Robin Hemley, of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, but I sent it to Black Inc and Cate chose it anonymously for her next edition. That short story residency with such great writers (Cate and Robin, Jennifer Mills and Adrienne Ferreira among them) was a lot of fun and such a melting pot of stories, ideas, and anecdotes, I came away thinking I could write a collection just off the back of it, and many of the others said the same. Cate and Jen went on to publish anthologies of shorts (*Like a House on Fire* and *The Rest is Weight*, respectively) and Adrienne a novel (*Watercolours*). It was also Peter Bishop's last as Director, so he dined with us most nights and the evenings were very conducive to spinning a yarn over a good red.

What's the relationship between your short stories and your novel writing practices?

Sometimes I feel like a different writer when I think about the two forms, they require such different techniques and focus. But what you learn working in one form can only help when you jump to the other because all narratives are still just juggling words to make a reader want to find out what happens next (I think I'm misquoting EM Forster there). I get an urgency about writing a short, sometimes it even feels like adrenalin. The bones get laid out quickly, I spend days picking over every word, and then I bury it for a few months before digging it up and having another pick. With my novel the urgency was to do anything but go to the desk. The bones were laid out painfully slowly, and I picked over every word way too soon because I'm a bit OCD in that department. I have to have at least some passages that I can bear to read, even when I might have to throw them all out anyway. At least with a short story, if you must chuck it out, you haven't lost too much, and when you feel you've nailed it, it's such a great buzz. You might only get glimpses of that with a novel and even those are a long time coming.

I was instantly enchanted by and slightly envious of your exotic-sounding path to Sydney's northern beaches. Here's an extract from your website bio:

Jo Riccioni was born in the UK to an Italian father and English mother. She studied English at Leeds University and graduated with a Masters in Medieval Literature. She taught English before moving to Singapore in the 1990s, where she became a business trainer, covering the Asia Pacific region. Later she moved to Paris, where she worked for the *International Herald Tribune*. Further work in finance took her to Sydney, Australia, where she now lives.

Sounds fabulous! How much has your English/Italian heritage and peripatetic life informed your fiction writing?

Other people's lives always sound more exotic, don't they? But bios don't let you see between the lines: like finding yourself in the financial capital of Asia, unable to pay your rent and having to quickly find a job that pays decent money because a local teacher's salary doesn't cut it for a single expat. Obviously annual trips to Italy as a child to visit grandparents were a big influence on me and that's all through my novel, but the peripatetic lifestyle? I'm not so sure. I didn't start writing until I settled in Australia and had a family, and it used to worry me that I wasn't a real "Australian" writer, that I struggled to write about the country I was living in and had such a confused sense of belonging. I'd read lots of other writers whose whole body of work was about one small area of one particular country and I loved that immediate sense of identity and authenticity it gave their work. I'd listen to writers talking about "place" all the time and I worried I'd never have that. Perhaps that's why I bust my guts early on writing that very Australian story, *Can't Take the Country Out of the Boy*, because I was trying to prove something! When Jason Steger phoned me to say he was going to publish it in *The Age*, he said he was surprised to discover I was English and I knew then that I'd pulled it off — the lie that all fiction really is. Slowly, though, I began to realize that place can be an internal landscape informed by memory and longing and carried with you like baggage to other places, just as much as it is the physical, tangible one you're living in. And perhaps I could actually write about England and Italy better being removed from them? And of course, there are plenty of writers who have written like this – David Malouf, to name one of the greats.

The novel is set in postwar Leyton, a small English farming community; to what extent did your father's Italian background and immigrant experience inspire or influence the creation of the Onorati brothers, whose different responses to their outsider status lie at the heart of your story?

I recorded both my father and my uncle talking about their boyhoods in Italy and England, and their immigrant experience. So, yes, much of the book was inspired by family history. But my history is equally English. My Nana and her sister used to tell me stories of what it was like in England during and after the war, and my mum fascinated me with accounts of meeting these exotic, good-looking Italians

on the high street in her village and being 'courted' by my dad. But, as I've already said, fiction is a lie, and so are my characters and the details of their circumstances. After all, that's where the fun begins: heightening the stakes and tensions, working with themes and personality traits that interest you. Plus, the timescales aren't true to my family's history. For my English scenes, I wanted to be dealing with young people trying to find themselves in that immediate post-war period because it was a complicated and challenging time, especially for women — a time when they had tasted the freedoms granted by war jobs and national responsibilities, but were then expected to tie up their aprons and go back into the kitchen. Essentially, I think that dilemma still speaks to a lot of women juggling careers and families today. That's what struck me when I was researching the period: we might have more choices than our post-war grandmothers and mothers, but politically, socially, even emotionally, we haven't come that far.

I constantly lament my own one-dimensional ethnicity – white Australian as far as the eye can see – and am insatiably greedy for the cultural richness I perceive in people whose ethnic identities are more complicated and far more interesting than my own. What I wouldn't give to be half Italian! And yet I know mixed race people, as well as the children and grandchildren of Australia's many and varied immigrant families, often feel extreme ambivalence and worse about the very layered identity I envy. What are your own thoughts?

Well, it's definitely one thing to adopt a foreign culture as an adult and another to have it thrust upon you from birth. For multi-cultural kids it often boils down to feeling confused by mixed messages, I guess. A simplistic example is the Anglo-French household of friends of ours where the British dad tells his kid during dinner, "Elbows off the table," and the French mother walks in a few minutes later and says, "What are your hands doing under the table? Get them up." I think there's always one culture the kid identifies with more than the other, even if they're a family who move around a lot. In my case, my father had adopted England very early on in his life, so my second culture was imposed by my grandparents and having to go to Italy every summer to visit them after they retired there. My sisters and I definitely had a love-hate relationship with the place. It wasn't all ice-cream and pizza and swinging about on Vespas down cobbled alleyways. It was, *Your skirt's too short, Your jeans are too tight, Don't talk to those Italian boys, When are you going to meet a nice Italian boy?, Don't talk in that village dialect, Speak Italian instead of English, Get out and see Italy, Why do you want to go sightseeing when you can stay at home and crotchet a bedspread for your corredo da sposa?* All those wonderful mixed messages that multicultural kids have to navigate! But my sisters and I still go back when we can and we eat and drink too much and laugh about our Italian traits. It's still in our blood.

Tell us about the genesis and gestation of the novel.

Well, I was on a train to Edinburgh and the characters just suddenly came to me fully formed ... no, only kidding! I love how writers post-publication look back and impose stories around the writing of their stories. They're almost as fascinating as the novels themselves. So for what it's worth, here's mine: I was 15 and my O Level History teacher had given us a summer holiday assignment to ask our grandparents what they remembered of the Second World War. So I went to Italy that summer and I asked my grandfather if he'd talk to me about his memories. He looked straight at me and said, 'No'. Of course that only made me even more curious. When my dad told him it was for a school project, Nonno did eventually open up and I discovered he'd been the Fascist commissioner in his village before the war and had actually seen both Hitler and Mussolini. He told me a little about his experiences as a prisoner too, how some of his compatriots had died in camps in Egypt and South Africa and on the boat to Liverpool. On the other hand, my English Nana had filled my head with Victory gardens and ration books and bombers taking off from RAF Molesworth — similar stories to the ones my school friends were bringing back to the classroom. When it was my turn to speak, I nearly bowed out under peer pressure and came very close to only telling the English version, like everyone else. At 16, in a WASPish middle class comprehensive school, who wants to identify themselves as the granddaughter of a Fascist fighting on the wrong side of the War? But I did and everyone seemed pretty fascinated and asked lots of questions. Even then I remember thinking, "I should do something with this story". And thirty years later, I did.

Where and how do you work? Any writing superstitions or habits you care to share?

My computer is in one of those amorphous rooms that's both spare bedroom, office, music room and general dumping ground for family detritus. But I do my best to guard it territorially. I'm a morning person, so, I like to get up at 5am and do a good two and half hours in the dark and quiet before anyone starts demanding my attention. I keep social media and internet off and often those couple of hours are better for raw material than any of the other three or four I might manage in dribs and drabs during the rest of the day. My brain seems to prefer the afternoon hours for editing and reading. I like to work on raw material in that transition between sleep and fully firing. I don't know what it is – something more latent, subliminal, less critical? At night I've usually become so over-stimulated and over-stretched by other demands I'm good for nothing but watching re-runs of *Game of Thrones*.

I'm always devastated when people with an ancestral language other than English let it lapse within their family, but assimilation – particularly post-war, I imagine – has of a very nasty way of silencing mother-tongues. What happens to the two languages, English and Italian, in the novel? Are they in conflict or do they find a way to co-exist?

Yes, there is definitely conflict focused on language both in my family history and the novel. My grandfather was adamant everyone spoke English when the family first moved there, so he must have been smarting under certain amount of immigrant shame. In my novel, this attitude manifests itself in the character of Vittorio and his father, who want to leave everything about Italy behind them. My poor Nonna, though, never really learned English properly. She managed to work in factories in England for most of her life knowing only a few basic sentences coloured with some pretty advanced expletives. It was hysterical to hear her speak. My dad and his brothers and sisters always used Italian around her but they could change languages mid-sentence if someone got stuck on a word or they could express something better in the other language. I was fascinated by this as a child because they weren't just speaking two languages, they were speaking two country's dialects with regional accents on top of it all.

In the Italian sections of my novel, language initially presented me with a problem technically, because I was working in English but trying to catch a certain way of speaking that reflects not only Italian rhythms, but also the region's dialect, to be true to where my family come from and give my setting authenticity. I used a peppering of Italian words and phrases to solve this problem, but in the end I don't think you can go overboard linguistically, otherwise you end up needing the footnotes of Victorian novel, or else you get *sommat akin t' Joseph in Wutherin' Heights*, if you know what I mean, which is laborious for modern readers and which most editors these days don't want to know about.

What's your own linguistic profile? How important is it to you that your children learn Italian, and how challenging is that from Sydney's northern beaches?

I'd love my children to learn Italian but it's not on offer in many high schools here. We don't speak it at home because it's not my mother tongue and I'm not perfectly fluent anyway. They've been to Italy several times now and the connection has been made for them. If they want to spend time there and learn it when they're older it's up to them. Despite my Italian background, I ended up in France, speaking French as an adult, so my philosophy is not to obsess too much about language learning. Learn it when and if you feel inspired or need to. And who says you have to be fluent? There's a lot of fun to be had in not being completely fluent anyway. I've seen both French and Italians use this to great advantage.

As a writing mum, what's your version of the juggling act?

I've got no qualms about saying my kids come first and they always have. That perhaps explains why I overshot so many of my editorial deadlines. I keep barricading the office door and ignoring them but they always know I'm in there somehow! I was doing a radio interview by telephone recently and I taped a big notice to the door saying "Do Not Enter at Peril of No Xbox For a Month." (Who was I trying to fool? The only person that punishes is myself!) Sure enough, half way through the interview my son peeps his head round the door:

"Mum, can I have an apple?"

"Yep, you can have all the ice cream and all the Tim-Tams too if you want. Knock yourself out."

That just about sums up my juggling act.

Two brothers with antithetical reactions and priorities: it's a juicy dramatic and indeed comedic premise, particularly for the many readers with polar opposite siblings. Why brothers, and were there any surprises inhabiting these very different male minds?

I guess brothers were an easy way of capturing contrast, showing differing reactions to the war, to immigration, to ambition and desire. I've always been interested in siblings generally, especially sibling placement and how brothers and sisters sometimes define themselves antagonistically. The Cain and Abel trope is not exactly original, but we're still fascinated with it in fiction and screenplays, aren't we? The brothers also handily allowed me to establish a romantic triangle, another story archetype that we've been fascinated with since time immemorial. I've don't have brothers myself, but I didn't exactly approach the Onorati boys thinking, "I've got to get into the head of these men, these brothers." I was just interested in them as characters, having worked with highly driven, extroverted people and also having experienced the strange, often powerful pull that introverts can exert over others, too - just as Connie, my female protagonist experiences.

Gossip exists everywhere people gather; tell us about the interesting role gossip plays in *The Italians at Cleat's Corner Store*.

I experienced villages both in England and Italy and gossip was always a part of life in both. I particularly remember as a teenager in Italy meeting up quite innocently with friends for ice-cream in the evening and before I'd even got home my Nonna already knew what I flavour I'd ordered, who'd paid for it and who was sitting next to me on the piazza steps. I think they telegraphed news along the vineyard wires. I remember my grandfather being outraged when he heard I was seen talking to a particular boy who was from a family known for their communist sympathies during the war. I found it incredible that these residual prejudices and assumptions were still woven into the fabric of the village more than 40 years later, and after everything that happened in the conflict. And I suppose that influenced me when I was writing the novel.

How and why did you decide on a rural English setting for the novel? I'm wondering not just about the characters and the action within the novel, and the reasons why Leyton works for all of that, but also about structuring the novel and whether it was more manageable for the size of the village.

Village life wasn't a conscious decision: it was just what I knew. But I guess small town life as a backdrop does help to heighten the stakes for my characters. I'm

more interested in small lives generally, I think, in my fiction: small, unnoticed lives and the pathos in them.

Tell us about the character of Connie, the teenager enthralled by Vittorio and Lucio's foreign mystique.

Connie is a little bit me, a little bit my mum when she was young, a little bit Everywoman, I guess. Perhaps for me she represents all women who've ever felt trapped: trapped by place, by education (or lack of it), trapped by family and social expectations, trapped by love. Of course, she's enthralled by the Italians because they're the closest she can get to her own escape from the small and bland and mundane. But, ultimately, I absolutely needed to give Connie some power over her own happiness as part of her coming of age in this novel, because that's what I want for all women!

Lucio is haunted by memories of war in the mountains of Lazio, a region of Central Italy; did you travel to Lazio for research, and how great a dramatic role does this haunting Other Place play in the novel?

Montelupini is my fictional name for a real place and I've been travelling there all my life. That place and its regions are incredibly important to me, not just because of my roots but because I've always, always been a foreigner there. It's the sort of place that's so old, you're still a foreigner if you've been living there for three generations. I suspect my writing about it was dealing with this feeling of being from that place but always being an outsider. And this manifests itself mostly in the character of Letia, the boys' mother, who for various reasons is an outcast in her own village.

Finally, how did you manage real and historical aspects of the story?

Well, I read up on my history dealing with both timeframes and both locations. I made sure my plot could fit plausibly in the historical context of the war in Italy and post-war rural England. I delved deeply into the personal histories recorded by people on the BBC People's War website (which is, by the way, utterly fascinating for a novelist as it offers such a very real insight into the everyday lives of people during the War and just afterwards). I also read other novels, by English and Italian authors set in that period, and even pored over self-published memoirs I came across in local libraries to cross-check my writing and make it sound as true as possible to life at the time. Against this I had the notes I'd taken of my own family's memories. Once all that was stewing nicely, I basically I made it all up.

And so what's next? Have you already commenced #2 and if so, what can you tell us? Anything else you'd like to share, please feel free! Thanks so much, Jo!

What's next? Not sure yet. I have a very early idea for another novel, but nothing I can talk lucidly about. Once I'd finished my proofs, I jumped straight into a short story that I'd been wanting to work on but hadn't allowed myself to begin because of my novel deadlines. It was nice having it there waiting and I think I'd sub-consciously kept it in the sidelines knowing I might feel a bit panicky coming

out of several years of work on one piece with nothing to cling to. I expected to feel relief and satisfaction and at least some celebration after my novel was released, but I don't cut myself much slack on that front. Perhaps that's something I need to work on! I've been listening to the very excellent discussions between Charlotte Wood and Alison Manning in their *Mind of One's Own* podcasts and I'm finding they are really helping me to understand a lot of the emotions that have taken me by surprise in the writing life. I think they've struck a chord with me because they're a bit like being at Varuna and benefitting from that sense of a "community" of artists, of experienced writers sharing what they know about the business and making a rookie feel less alone.