

# Writers' Retreat

## by Barbara Westerway

The Society of Women Writers' Retreat was held at the Brahma Kumaris Inner Space Retreat Centre at Wilton, NSW on 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> April 2009. Set in 10 acres of natural bushland the Retreat is a delightfully tranquil environment.

For those anticipating somewhat Spartan accommodation the rooms were a pleasant surprise. Good beds, doonas, electric blankets, heaters, large windows, en-suites and an abundance of hot water.

We were greeted warmly by the gracious Brahma Kumaris 'sisters' who could not have been more helpful.

Our first guest speaker was the warm, witty and effervescent Leonie McMahon. Her talk was 'Find Your Pathway to Success: Release your full Potential'. She led us through a session of E.F.T. Tapping, (Emotional Freedom Technique), and her message was loud and clear.

"Happiness is a choice," She said. "We make ourselves happy, so don't hang around waiting for someone else to do it." She warned of negative thoughts - the 'I'm not good enough' syndrome - and made a strong case for the use of humour in our lives.

Leonie spoke eloquently for an hour and then, to our astonishment, broke into a medley of

Forty-two writers came from as far away as Queensland, Morisset and Newcastle, the Central Coast, and thanks to Committee member Valerie Barrows' efforts, there was a large group of ladies from Nowra, Wollongong and the Southern Highlands. We were delighted with the attendance of so many young women, who added energy and enthusiasm to the event.

The weather was very kind to us, and after dinner on the first evening we walked to the Meditation Hall along a pathway lit with fairy lights.



**LEONIE**

Irish songs, all the way from wistful to plaintive to rollicking. At the end of the evening we moved off under a velvet black, star-studded sky and went to bed on a real 'high'.



**ROBYN**

On Saturday morning Robyn McWilliam gave the first workshop. Fortified by hot porridge, tea, toast and fruit, we settled down to a fascinating session on place and settings, emotions and dreams.

She said, "Settings are used to create atmosphere or mood. A reader doesn't fully engage in a story until they know where it's set. Whenever possible go 'on site' taking a camera with you, jotting down what makes an impression. Sensory details allow your readers to feel as if they were there."

Her workshop was full of practical advice: "avoid the dreaded adverb, don't use clichés, and when you use a real setting, research it thoroughly – don't risk being inaccurate". The session concluded with participants interviewing each other about emotions, and writing about a variety of settings displayed in a series of pictures to add to visual stimuli.



**POSIE**

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Posie Graeme-Evans, our second guest speaker gave a vivid, moving and startlingly honest account of the difficulties she is having trying to finish her latest book. She spoke of both her success and her angst over her 'failures'. She told us about the highly successful television series *McLeod's Daughters* and how it 'just overwhelmed and overshadowed everything, so much of my other working life'.

The title of her talk 'It ain't over 'til it's over' refers to her mother who began writing and was published at 23, but finally finished her last book at 83. Hope for those of us as yet unpublished, including your correspondent.

Posie calls herself a fatalist who also believes in luck. "I believe you can increase your own luck, and being here today is helping you," She said. "Writing is a marathon, and as writers we are all equal in this struggle." She referred to the sets and the settings in *McLeod's Daughters* as 'my hymn to our beautiful country'.

Saturday afternoon began with a talk by Charlie Hogg (Director of Brahma Kumara Raja Yoga Centres in Australia). He deplored 'the crisis in the soul of humanity' and the anxiety, stress and depression so prevalent in today's society, highlighting the power of positive thinking and meditation. He said, "Meditation is an act of love, and the greatest ingredient in good health is happiness."



**CHARLIE**

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**FELICITY**

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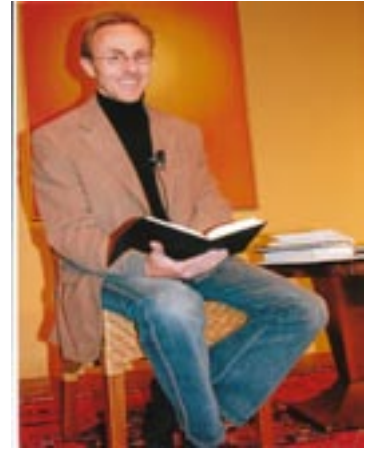
Felicity Pulman's workshop 'Magic and Fantasy' was 'hands on'. We played with 'magical' objects, dreamed up magical creatures, created characters, and worked on plots. We were in Fantasyland. "At the heart of any fantasy there is always a quest."

Even those of us who had never written this type of story before created scenarios using all the things Felicity had talked about, Magic. Real Magic.

**Saturday** evening brought a delightful and unexpected dinner by candlelight.

Guest speaker, Dr Mark Tredinnick, spoke elegantly about his work. How he writes, how he gets his ideas, the care he takes with words – “there needs to be a fundamental humanity in writing,” was his message.

At the end of the evening he read stanzas from two of his prized poems: ‘Have you seen’, which won the first ever Blake Poetry Prize in 2008; and, the wonderful ‘Eclogues’ with its images of swooping gulls and soaring cranes and people, which won him the Newcastle Poetry Prize in 2007.

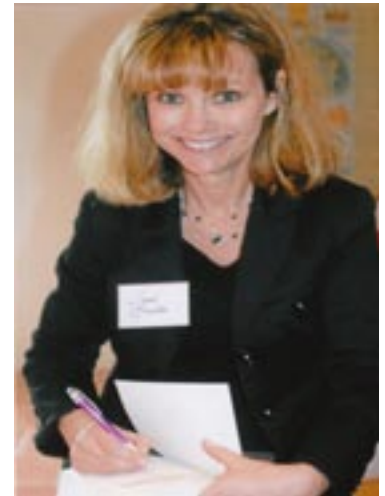


**MARK**

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**Sunday**, our last day, we had Meditation before breakfast followed by the final workshop with Carol Baxter. In a brilliant bit of planning (well done, Pam!) we were entertained and energised by the lively, enthusiastic Tutor who told us how to “Turn Dry Facts into Exciting Narrative”.

Carol writes “popular histories’ and had us all enthralled as she read passages from her books. “Character is what drives fiction, and sensory details bring it alive,” She said. “Hear the flapping of the sails, the groaning of the ropes – practise, practise, practise. Read every book about writing you can get your hands on, read good writing and bad writing, and measure yourself against both.”



**CAROL**

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**SELWA**

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Selwa Anthony, Literary Agent Extraordinaire, finished the programme - a wonderful way to end our weekend. She is the lady whom Colleen McCulloch says “has the best eye for a manuscript of anyone I have known”.

Selwa was born in Cowra, NSW of Lebanese background. She spoke fervently of her love for Australia and her struggle to promote Australian authors. It was very special to have her with us, sharing her knowledge and expertise.

Our weekend was a great success. I did not find anyone who did not enjoy it, but perhaps the outstanding feature was the extraordinary diversity of the speakers and workshop convenors. As one writer said when we were leaving, “Best value I’ve had in years!”.

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