

Pam Lythgo, Pacita Alexander, Lili Ma, Philippa Kelly, Alma De Groen

TRIBUTES TO ELIZABETH

Elizabeth's many friends wish her a retirement that is in all senses of the words, happy and fulfilling. The following are a few selected tributes from people, broadly representative of Elizabeth's friends, co-workers, students, colleagues and fellow writers.

Pam Lythgo

My friendship with Elizabeth goes back to the mid-sixties in Brisbane when we were both studying for our Speech and Drama Diplomas with Joan Whalley who, at that time, was Director of Twelfth Night Theatre. Joan always encouraged her students to perform on stage. As a result we appeared in *Under Milk Wood*, an experience made more memorable as it was performed in a large marquee that had been erected on the site at Bowen Hills where the future theatre complex was to be built. The dressing rooms were patches of green grass between the back of the stage platform and the outer edge of the marquee. Costume changes were executed in a sitting position, avoiding the pools of water that crept under the canvas on the nights when it rained. Neither of us could have imagined that some twenty years on, we would once again be appearing together in Tropic Line's production of *Under Milk Wood* in Townsville in the comfort of the Civic Theatre.

I moved to Townsville in 1969 to take up a position at the newly-established Teachers' College. In the following year Elizabeth joined the English Department of James Cook University, then a College of the University of Queensland. I decided to pursue further studies in English and Education and so we entered into a new relationship as lecturer and student. Along with fellow students, I experienced Elizabeth's keen interest in her students and her willingness to be accessible at all times. Her love and enthusiasm for her subject was always evident and caught by her students.

Elizabeth has always had the ability to involve her students in extra-curricular activities and so I became involved with the English, Language and Literature Association. The seventies were exciting years for E.L.L.A., with so many activities taking place— play readings, poetry readings and performances. One highlight was the performance of *Everyman* in Queen's Gardens. E.L.L.A. also organized many lectures and workshops conducted by well-known Australian poets, playwrights, novelists, short-story writers and historians. These events

gave people in Townsville the opportunity to meet and work with many well-known figures in the Australian literary scene. To lower the costs, committee members worked hard behind the scenes— housing, feeding, transporting and organizing social events. Elizabeth was always a dynamic force in maintaining the momentum of E.L.L.A.

E.L.L.A. committee members were active in the production of many issues of *LiNQ*. In those early years, to lower the production costs, we would do the layout prior to printing. I can still see Elizabeth and myself spending many long hours working with a light-box.

In 1982, I left JCU and returned to working in schools. This move led me to a new relationship with Elizabeth, that of playwright/director. Elizabeth revealed her great skill for writing musical plays for children—*The Sound-Proof Ark*, *The Mango Eaters*, *Townsville Street*, *Crocodiles in Orbit* and *The Wonder World of Windmills*. These plays, written for whole school casts, not only captured the children's imagination but were topical and provided valuable learning experiences.

In 1988 I was able to direct another of Elizabeth's plays, *An Angel in My Desk*, a musical history to mark the centenary of St Mary's Parish, West End. This play involved both adults and children and skilfully depicted the highlights of a hundred years through song and dialogue.

Elizabeth has also written plays that have been produced locally and these have provided challenging roles for many actors; including myself. These included *Dilly, Dilly, Come and Be Killed* and *The Dark Behind the Stage*, both of which were produced for Townsville Little Theatre.

As I look back on my long association with Elizabeth, I recall many of her outstanding qualities—the warmth of her friendship, her readiness to encourage and guide, her great sense of humour, her care and concern for others and her wonderful hospitality. Over the years we have shared many common interests—literature, theatre, murder stories, train travel, good jokes, fine dining and, of course black poodles. My wish for her is that she will soon embark on that long-awaited murder study so that her friends can add another crime-writer to their reading lists.

Pacita Alexander

"Australian Drama," Elizabeth's PhD thesis, was, appropriately, the catalyst for her suggestion that she and I collaborate on a biography of my father, Tom

Inglis Moore. While assessing his radio play *We're Going Through*, she wrote to me asking for access to his papers in the National Library. We agreed to work on the biography as a long-term project, neither of us realizing how long-term it would turn out to be. Our collaboration has had its own drama, our efforts complicated by geography and circumstance. As Elizabeth lives in Townsville, and I lived when we began in Melbourne, the tyranny of distance has meant huge profits for Qantas and Telstra. However by updating our computers and skills, we can now communicate on the internet, though still sometimes share the excitement of a research discovery by phone. Elizabeth has braved Melbourne winters, and even driven south to Camden, where I live now, and frequently offered warm hospitality in Townsville, for us to "collogue and collab" as Miles Franklin would say. We have also spent years trekking independently to Canberra in the summer holidays as we worked our way through the fifty boxes of my father's papers there.

Our first meeting was at an ASAL conference, and since then I have learnt to appreciate Elizabeth's skill as a critic, her tactful editing, scrupulous scholarship, and generous friendship. Although Elizabeth never met my father, they would have had a lot in common, both dedicated to the cause of Australian literature, to Filipino writing in English, and sunshine.

**My Respected Supervisor and My Beloved Friend
Elizabeth Perkins
by Lili Ma**

Two weeks before I left Australia, my thesis was completed. It was temporarily bound. I handed it to my respected supervisor Elizabeth Perkins, "Elizabeth, we've made it." Elizabeth bowed to the thesis before she took it with two hands, "PhD, honourable thesis. All these years' hard work, all these years' separation, and all these years' loneliness are rewarded at this moment." Only she and I knew well enough what she meant. Tears were in my eyes, I couldn't speak one word although I had too much that I wanted to tell Elizabeth at this very moment. I wanted to say I felt mostly grateful for her. I wanted to tell her how much I loved her. I wanted to say the thesis couldn't have been completed at all without her encouragement, her help not only in the respect of my studies, but also when I had difficulties in living abroad.

I started to write small pieces for my thesis as early as 1996. The writing in the first two years was thin and not well-structured. Elizabeth and I met with each other regularly talking about my writing word by word. Till today I still keep some edition of my drafts with Elizabeth's correction. Her thoroughness used to make me feel ashamed of my own mistakes some of which were caused by

carelessness. My writing must have given her the worst headache in her teaching career. But the approach of beginning to write early helped me a great deal: I made gradual progress in English writing; also I didn't have to do all the writing at once in the last year. In 1999, we met with each other more regularly. I had made great progress in writing with the help of Elizabeth. I treasured the times we could work together, only allowing my sadness to grow secretly as my departure time was drawing near. There were several sad times in those months when I left Elizabeth after our talk about my chapters. As she was standing in her drive way, waving me goodbye, I couldn't help coming to tears. I told myself this would be one of the few times that I spent with her, communicating with each other through my writing work. The sadness of leaving her overwhelmed me so that I had to drive away as quickly as possible, for I did not want her to see tears flooding on my face.

One night near my departure, I cried aloud to myself, feeling very complicated. It was a great relief for me to have completed my thesis, yet, it was sad to leave Australia, to leave Townsville, to leave James Cook University, to leave the English Department and above all, to leave Elizabeth. She had looked after me for more than four years, and I wanted to do something for her. I thought of a Chinese saying: you should give back a stream if you receive one drop of water. Yet, in Australia, there was so little that I could do for Elizabeth in return. Elizabeth would say upon hearing this, "But this is my work."

So many unforgettable things happened between me and Elizabeth that they appear in my mind without my trying hard to recall. Or rather, they have grown into part of my memory after so many times' recalling. Elizabeth prepared a glass of water for me before my first seminar, telling me to yawn with my mouth closed should I feel nervous. Elizabeth lent me an overcoat before Kathy and I went to the South to do our team research. Elizabeth took me to many plays, to the Chamber Music Festival, to the midnight mass on Christmas night. The soup she made for me after I had an ectopic operation had a great soothing effect. Her timely encouragement helped me greatly to go through one hard time after another.

I will always feel lucky to have known Elizabeth—a kind and wise woman as my supervisor. With her supervision and company, my life in Australia has been less difficult and more rewarding.

Philippa Kelly

I first met Elizabeth Perkins in 1990 when I took up a lectureship at the Cairns Campus of James Cook University. This was to be my first lecturing position,

and Elizabeth inconspicuously did many things to ease my way into the job. She sent me her own lecture notes where she thought they might be useful; she took on part of my marking load herself in my first year; she had me to stay in her home when I came down to Townsville; she introduced me to her friends who were living in Cairns; and she was always a wise, funny and compassionate listener, ready to drop everything to help her many friends.

Elizabeth also became the strongest and most rigorous of scholarly mentors for me. She has a rare mix of intellectual rigour and creativity, as well as enormous erudition. This means that whatever work in progress one sends to her and no matter how distant the field from her own areas of expertise, at the very least she will offer pages of creative and generous insights. And the breadth of her intellectual interests means that she generally has an astute grasp of other fields beyond her own: most of the pieces I've sent to her in my own field of early modern studies have been greatly enhanced by her suggestions for material which might strengthen my arguments.

Elizabeth's support has extended and, indeed, even strengthened since my days at JCU. She is still my best and most critical reader; she recently read the whole of a PhD thesis I was supervising prior to submission; and she has been the most generous and selfless of friends. I think it says a lot about Elizabeth that the only thing I've heard remotely critical of her is something she would never change. A senior academic once said, "Elizabeth spends far too much time writing on out-of-the-mainstream authors." The attention Elizabeth gives to non-canonical writers is not a strategic position she takes: rather, it is an instinctive refusal to take the trendy line, a natural curiosity she has in writers and theories of literature beyond the critical highroad. She is one of the least self-interested scholars I have ever met, and she makes her colleagues and friends ashamed of motives which are less than generous. If I could name the most important gift she has given to me and to her other younger colleagues, it is to embrace academic life not as a career, but as a vocation.

Alma De Groen

I don't remember when I first met Elizabeth. It seems as if I've always known her. I think it was probably at an ASAL conference in Townsville. I remember being at her house with Thea Astley who was playing the piano. I took a photograph of them together—Thea and Elizabeth, not the piano—but it didn't come out.

When I learned that a book was being planned about my plays I asked that Elizabeth be the one to write it. I don't think I knew at the time just how much I

was asking. Elizabeth graciously shouldered the burden and bore it uncomplainingly for a number of years while she did her usual massive workload plus other books. From my point of view, it was one of the very few wise career moves I ever made. I'm very proud of the book. Now, when anyone asks about my work, I'm able to say: "Read this. It explains it far better than I can."

Elizabeth has travelled long distances to see my plays and I'm always grateful for her supportive presence. She was dramaturge at the Australian National Playwright's Conference for my most recent play, *The Woman in the Window*. The actors, and the director, Kate Cherry, were deeply impressed by her. She gave our endeavours a wider literary and historical context every time she spoke. Then she would apologise for saying too much when, in fact, we wished she would keep going.

Nick Enright, who served on the Australia Council with Elizabeth, said that he wished he had been taught by her. So do I; but in a sense I have been. I've had the benefit of many years of friendship, conversation, literary comment and advice. My hope is that, now she has retired, perhaps she can fly south for the summer more often.