

## INTERVIEW



## A TRIUMPH OF SPIRIT - KINGLAKE RISING FROM THE ASHES

KAREN KISSANE is the winner of the 2011 foundation of Australian Literary Studies Colin Roderick Award

Interview by LINDSAY SIMPSON

Karen Kissane remembers driving into Kinglake, the day after the 2009 Black Saturday bush fires with a news photographer. From the comfort of *The Age* newspaper office, the task had seemed challenging, but straightforward. To capture what had happened. Below, is what she remembers from that day.

“Kinglake is a small town at the top of a winding mountain road. At the bottom, everything looked fine. Cows, paddocks, gumtrees. Partway up the road, there was an abrupt change. It was like we found ourselves in a charcoal sketch of a European winter. Trees were stripped bare. Everything was grey with ash or black from being burned. Smoke drifted up from smouldering wood.

We drove over fallen power-lines puddled on the road like spaghetti. We swerved around groups of incinerated cars. We passed dozens and dozens of houses that were smashed to the ground as if stomped by a giant foot.

By the end of the 20-minute ride, the photographer and I had fallen silent. We had no words for this. It was like we had gone through a wormhole into another world; a kind of underworld.

We arrived to a silent town. It wasn't till later I realised that it lacked even birdsong and the buzz and chirp of insects. People milled about vacantly, with thousand-yard stares, too shocked to be grieving yet. That would change within a couple of days; the stories would spill out of them as they tried to make sense of what had happened. They remembered vividly, in scenes that were like snapshots, but often the images were out of order, like photos that had been thrown into a confused pile. That's what early memories of trauma are like: flashbulb moments.”

Karen said she was always conscious of the responsibilities of her task as a writer while

collecting the facts about “the worst of days”.

“I always do this with ordinary people who are talking about their own lives. I am very conscious that what goes into the media has a capacity, often inadvertently, to harm. I wanted to make sure that these subjects, many of whom were already traumatised, were not further hurt by my writing. I also knew from previous experience people generally respect the writer’s right to order the account, and change very little other than errors.”

Choosing the people with which to tell the story was serendipitous, she said.

“I had a strong, almost superstitious sense that I did not need to chase people, because they were coming to me. It was like the universe was telling me I was on the right track, by helping it all just unfold for me. I met both the grieving families sitting in the royal commission. We just started to chat. The amazing Sparkes family who fought the fire with their two small children, giving me one of the strongest chapters in the book: that was a mix of serendipity and following my gut. Shane Sparkes rang me at *The Age* one night, distraught that poor bushfire education was being blamed for so many people dying because he believed it had saved his family. He was talking in an excited, scattered way, but he did mention saving his children with a baby blanket and a hose while their house burned to the ground. On the basis of nothing else, just his urgency, which left me feeling that this guy had a big story, I made an appointment to go and speak to him and his wife, Bron – and their story gave me goosebumps. It gives readers goosebumps too.”

Karen said in one street, she discovered more than 20 people had died.

“We breathed in the devastation - literally as well as metaphorically, in terms of smoke and ash and the smell of death. If that overwhelming sense of grief had been my only experience from the bushfires, I think I would still be traumatised to this day. But luckily for me, police had locked down the mountain. If *The Age* rotated me out, they wouldn’t be able to get another reporter in. So I stayed, there, stranded, for nine days, and that made all the difference, because I got to see and hear things I will never forget.”

She said she met fire volunteers who had stayed on their trucks, driving past their own blazing houses to rescue other people.

I met a nurse who had never seen major burns before who kept her head and gave emergency aid to people who had almost no skin left; many of them people she knew.

“I met locals who rolled up to help and worked 18 hours a day, for nothing, for weeks. They comforted people who were sobbing because they needed to find dental records for their relatives, they found generators, they organised food and water and petrol to be brought back on to the mountain. They worked and they wept and they cracked black jokes; everyone had to wear identity bracelets like medical ID’s by then, and they joked that they were all prepped

now to go into a mental asylum.”

She said the army came and set up a huge free public kitchen.

“Those vast trays of mashed potatoes and roast lamb gave us all such comfort. The main street was flooded with donations from ordinary Australians; food, household goods, clothes and shoes. Little girls baked boxes of cookies that they sent up with a smiley note.”

“Everyone wanted to help. Locals were sometimes overwhelmed by it. One old farmer, going through a pile of new jeans, gestured at the dusty workpants he was wearing and said in dismay: “But they’re all good pants. Haven’t you got something more like this?”

After covering the Royal Commission into the fires, the terrible realisation dawned on her, that “all this suffering and devastation hadn’t just been an act of God. Many failures by men had contributed to it too.”

“Emergency systems had failed on the day. They knew for hours that Kinglake would be hit, but did not issue any warnings to its residents. I realised that bad policy had also added to the tragedy. Australians thought they had worked out their relationship with fire, and Australians were wrong.”

She was determined, in writing the book, not to let the people down who had entrusted her with their stories and she wanted to ensure she could engage the readers.

“I wanted readers to find themselves in the middle of the story without realising how they had been drawn into it. I also wanted them to see how bad decisions made back in air-conditioned offices were directly linked to terrible devastation on the ground many miles away.”

Karen describes herself as “a city girl”. She spent years covering courts and crime and said she once counted nine murdered children whose cases she had written about in quick succession.

“It can skew your view of the world,” she explains.

The 100,000-word book was written in eight weeks in the style of narrative journalism.

Kinglake “re-balanced the scales” for her. Witnessing a vast outpouring of courage and generosity, she watched “this little town” pull itself back onto its feet and saw “the triumph of the human spirit.”

She is the recently arrived foreign correspondent for *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* in Europe and London.