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## WORST OF DAYS - INSIDE THE BLACK SATURDAY FIRESTORM

Review of *Karen Kissane's Worst of Days -  
Inside the Black Saturday Firestorm*  
by Hazel Menehira

*Worst of Days - Inside the Black Saturday Firestorm* is destined to be regarded internationally as an iconic work of historical significance as well as an accomplished piece of Australian writing.

Karen Kissane's multi-dimensional coverage of Victoria's Black Saturday, February 7, 2009 bush fires is a masterly achievement of narrative journalism and the worthy winner of the 2011 Colin Roderick Award.

From the opening chapter, Kissane questions, explains, and tells true stories which power her positive dedication to honour, "those who died, those who mourn, and those who fought".

A senior journalist and writer with *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne, Kissane was perfectly positioned to leave no burnt gumnut unturned writing this inside

story. She covered both the aftermath of the Kinglake fires, 65 kms north east of Melbourne and one of the worst areas to be hit, and later reported on the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission hearings. Her comprehensive coverage includes countless interviews and accounts from individuals, families, heroes, and previously unheard of survivors.

Some chapters are headed with quotes from previous bushfires like the Black Thursday, fire of 1851 or the Black Friday fires of 1939. This underpins the historical significance of the Black Saturday tragedy when 121 died in the Kilmore fire that devastated the Kinglake Ranges. This was the deadliest fire on a day when 173 people died in fires across the state.

It also points to the importance of an opportunity to learn from history because tragedies are invariably followed by soul searching, scrutinised inquiry, recriminations, and analysis of support structure efficiency.

Burnt gum nut by gum nut, Kissane has pursued and revealed the bureaucratic bungling of the IECC (Integrated Emergency Coordination Centre), of the Victoria Country Fire Authority, and the DSF in its first untried fire season. February 2009 was a season when an understaffed, under resourced system was overloaded and unable to cope with a radical firestorm the power of many Hiroshimas. It was a firestorm fuelled by a heatwave desiccated forest environment.

Whatever the recriminations, the stark fact remains that an electrical spark fire ignition officially tagged at 11.49 am on

February 7, 2009, spotted in the Kilmore Gap (a low part of the Great Dividing Range) developed into a firestorm that erupted at a terrifying rate devastating lives and homes long before official warnings reached scattered communities.

The first Urgent Threat Message mentioning Kingslake was posted on the Country Fire Authority website at 5.55 p.m. ABC radio read out a warning at 4.10 p.m. when people were actually fighting for their lives. Kissane gives a full timeline (170). All those hours passed whilst, "So many people tried to get word out and so many people were defeated."

Kissane addresses the big question – how could this happen in this day and age?

Due to adherence to hierarchical rules, official control was not in the hands of Control Centres and fire fighters in the immediate fire's path. According to protocol, no inactivated centre could issue warnings. In the midst of the fire Kangaroo Ground Incident Control Centre (ICC) was not activated whilst Kilmore (ICC) was officially managing the fire. This with poor damaged communication technology, compounded omissions, mistakes, and procrastinations. As Kissane puts it, "Whole human beings can fall through cracks in the systems set up by officialdom."

Her writing flexibility and expertise allows the story to be told from all sides. In depth information and statements from key figures bring vital facts to life and readers are fully engaged throughout. Interspersed between chapters like "CFA in a mess!!!" "The War Room" and "The Official Mind", readers are absorbed into

the real time experiences of fire spotters, fire officers, fire crews, centre staff, and the people they battled to save.

Yes, there are descriptive paragraphs which give confronting graphic and immediate verbal images as in: "Warning", "Cometh the Hour", and chapters devoted to families enmeshed in terror beyond their imagining. Many of these chapters stand as riveting page turning stories where the trapped poise on the razor's edge of survival. This from "Family" (160):

Then with his son in his arms he vaulted through the window. He realised the half metre space between the water tanks was a better option. The second he got there, he turned on the tap and soaked the child. Everything around them was alight except the water tanks. He turned and was aghast to see there was no one behind him. He pushed (the boy) into the mud and ran to the window, yelling: 'Where the f---are you'

The "2008 Country Fire Authority booklet of Living in the Bush" outlined the: Prepare, Stay and Defend or Leave Early message, but it did not allow that the best prepared bush fire plans can fail for a multitude of reasons. Kissane noted that two thirds of those who died on Black Saturday perished in homes or buildings.

In all, The Royal Commission Inquiry made 51 recommendations which the State Government promised to implement. What no authority can promise is that fire's powerful fury will never again be unleashed.

The Black Saturday firestorm is personified in this book and the inclusion of photographs of it are impressive. The two graphic detailed plates, one showing the speed and extent of the fire and another the anatomy of the fire storm, assist readers to understand the geographical area. For those unfamiliar with the geography of the state they are an aid to localising the names of settlements, roads, properties and other pivotal key locations.

The acknowledgement pages comprise one of the most important sections of *The Worst of Days*. Key figures, organisations, and major players involved in the firestorm are noted along with writing colleagues and media teams. There is no doubt that all of those thanked contributed to the positive thrust of Kissane's work - to bring to public readership an inside story that had to be told in its entirety.

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