

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Elizabeth Riddell

1910-1998

Journalist & Poet

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 2 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell

Director/Producer Frank Heimans

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Study guide prepared by Darren Smith © NFSA

Also in Series 2: Faith Bandler, Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, Nancy Cato,
Frank Hardy, Phillip Law, Dame Roma Mitchell

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SYNOPSIS

Born in New Zealand in 1910, Elizabeth Riddell was recruited as a journalist straight from school. She began by writing film and theatre reviews and worked on **Smith's Weekly** where she joined the likes of Kenneth Slessor and Colin Simpson.

In 1939 Elizabeth started work on **The Sun** newspaper and during World War Two opened and ran the **Daily Mirror's** New York bureau. In 1944 she crossed the Atlantic to be in London and closer to the war. It was during those years that she wrote some of her best poetry.

In 1946 Elizabeth returned to Australia. She forged ahead with her newspaper work and also had three volumes of poetry published: **The Untrammelled**, **Poems** and **Forbears**.

In the 1960s she became senior interviewer and critic for the arts pages of **The Australian**. She has had several books of poetry published including **Elizabeth Riddell: Selected Poems**, **From the Midnight Courtyard**, **Occasions of Birds** and **The Difficult Island**, and in 1992 won a NSW Literary Award.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Gender Studies, Personal Development, Media Studies, Modern History and Studies of Society and Environment.

POETRY

Although most well known as a journalist, it is poetry that Elizabeth cherished as something closer to her life. The interview itself opens with a reading of her poetry.

Poetry is a fairly unique method of expression, and one that can often baffle and confuse. Indeed, some might say this is the precise starting point for reading poetry. A poem is more than simply a sentimental outpouring of emotion without structure. On the contrary, poetry is like an intricate machine made with words. Working together, these words project images, much like the mechanics of an old film projector.

Poetic language is different from other uses of language. Unlike language in newspapers, conversations or most fiction, we can't just sit back with a poem and be entertained or excited by it. Nor can we imagine understanding it because we understand what the words mean. Try explaining an emotion you feel or a vague idea in your head—how well can you make these things understood by other people?

The main device in poetry is the metaphor. This enables 'impossible' connections between words or images to become sensible or truthful. Put simply, a poetic metaphor is the union of unlike things (pictures to ideas, ideas to feelings, feelings to objects etc) such that we discover unexpected relationships and come upon new insight.

Aside from metaphor, there are other devices for using words in poetry. Onomatopoeia is a device to produce noise from words, and to use that noise as a kind of sound effect. Poetry has its origins in song and music. Words also lend rhythm to a poem, through stressed and unstressed syllables. Rhyme is another device for produce sound in poetry.

Poetry is like painting. Unlike other literary forms, it is contained within a very tight frame. A painting presents not only the total image, but also colours that make us feel, and different uses of space, textures and shapes. Each of these elements is suggestive. Also, visual art confronts us and sometimes baffles us in the same way poetry does.

Despite the supposed modernisation of writing and storytelling, poetry continues to have a presence. This is a fine achievement for something with a history extending into antiquity. Poetry is also quite a universal form of written and spoken expression found across many cultures and societies.

Discussion questions

- What do you understand by metaphors? Give an example.
- What are some other similarities between poetry and visual art?
- There are three main uses of metaphor in the interview. The opening reading is one, but Elizabeth also talks about the cockatoos she saw on a tree and the couple at a bus stop. In groups, discuss these uses of metaphor and what Elizabeth is suggesting.
- Song lyrics often abound in metaphors and other poetic devices. After all, poetry first emerged from song. Find a song you like, preferably for its lyrics. Look at the words and try to identify:
 - metaphors
 - onomatopoeia
 - how words create/work with the beat

WOMEN WRITING

'A woman must have money and a room of one's own if she is to write fiction,' wrote Virginia Woolf in 1929. This is certainly true for Elizabeth Riddell, who developed a successful career as a journalist and lived an adventuresome and independent life. In her writing and her life, Elizabeth challenged some very basic social conceptions about women.

Traditionally, women were both visible and invisible in fiction writing. As objects of writing, women were quite visible, but not so as authors, reserved as the field was to men of letters. Indeed, at various stages in history, women were discouraged and even forbidden to read books for fear they would be corrupted. The 19th century American poet, Emily Dickinson wrote:

'He buys me books, but begs me not to read them, because he fears they joggle the mind... I would like to learn. Could you tell me how to grow, or is it unconveyed, like melody or witchcraft?'¹

The place of women in literature reproduced gendered relations in society at the time. Men were the writers or narrators ('subjects', it was their story to tell), while women were usually written about ('objects'). While not always strictly the case, with writers challenging these norms, the tendency was to reproduce this relation of power—the viewer and the viewed.

Soon, however, the viewer began to be watched and so became the object of analysis and criticism.

In 1929, Virginia Woolf published **A Room of One's Own**. In it she dealt with the obstacles and prejudices that have hindered women writers. She also discussed the need for a change in the forms of literature that had been 'made by men out of their own needs for their own uses'. In the last chapter she explores the possibility of an androgynous mind, an idea she pursued in her novel **Orlando**.

Woolf was not only significant as a writer because of the quality of her work, but also for opening up the space for women writers and challenging conventions. Elizabeth Riddell has played a very similar role in Australian literature.

Discussion questions

- How does Elizabeth speak of her experience as a writer?
- How is the opening statement true for her life?
- What do you think were some of the obstacles facing women writers? Do you think there are still obstacles?
- How can a piece of writing be 'gendered'? How were social relations between genders reproduced in literature?
- What do you think Virginia Woolf means by 'an androgynous mind'?

JOURNALISM

Elizabeth Riddell cut a strong path in journalism and made such an achievement with little to no formal training. At each turn in her career, Elizabeth was thrown into the deep end but we get a sense of the gusto with which she approached her work. In the interview some interesting points about journalism arise out of her experiences.

Elizabeth started out writing reviews for theatre and ballet. She explains how, at the time, women journalists were assigned to write about women's issues or for the social pages. There was little scope for women in journalism to report on other issues. However, Elizabeth was sent on assignment as a New York correspondent during World War Two—an assignment, she explains, normally reserved for males.

Her insights into journalism develop further when discussing this period of her career. She mentions how much of the news on the war came to Australia through the New York bureau. Elizabeth remarks on how this influenced the way in which news was presented.

The movement of news information from place to place remains a reality in today's media outlets. Overseas news is quite often transmitted (and bought) through other much larger media outlets, such as Britain's BBC or America's CNN. Consider, for example, reportage on the Gulf War in the 1990s.

One of the main reasons for this practice is cost and efficiency. Larger news agencies simply have more adequate means to get to the news 'event' and technology to transmit the information rapidly. This practice can raise questions about the reliability of information, control over 'news' products and diversity in news reportage. The concerns can become all the more acute the further the audience is from the news event.

We require news to be as fresh and timely as possible. However, like a game of Chinese whispers, by the time news information has reached the news desk, it can go through slight to radical changes. Agencies also have processes for then editing and trimming that information to present the final product.

Effective ways of overcoming this tendency in journalism are to encourage a diverse and independent set of media agencies, and for readers to be more critical 'readers' of news information.

Discussion questions

- What observations does Elizabeth make about journalism?
- How does she describe her time as a journalist?
- She refers to the famous Kokoda trail photo. What angle was given to the photo in America? What else could the photo be said to represent? Discuss the representation of Australia given by the American angle.
- Think of some stages involved in turning information into the finished news product. How do you think that information can change?
- How can we become critical readers of news?

RELATIONSHIPS

Elizabeth lived a life full of adventure and movement, from her career to her relationships. In doing so, she challenged stereotyped paths for women, not least in her relationships with people.

During the 1940s and 50s, attitudes about the proper position and behaviour for women were highly conservative and ideal-driven. They also set limitations on women in their public and private lives. Elizabeth mentions some of these in the interview.

Perhaps the strongest stereotypes related to women and relationships. The stable and nuclear family was an absolute and unimpeachable model to be followed. The symbolic role for women in this arrangement was her devotion to husband and children, care and nurturing. The symbolic role for men was breadwinner and leader.

Since then, the idea of family has unravelled to a large extent. One major cause of this was the increasing number of women in the workforce and changes in social attitudes about gender in public life. Equally important though, has been the realisation that such an absolute concept of family did little to reflect the realities of human relationships.

While some lament the decline of these 'family values', families remain a strong feature of our society. Rather than having disintegrated, ideas of the family have begun to reflect changing social attitudes and relationships.

Discussion questions

- Give examples of how Elizabeth's attitudes, experiences and choices stood against the dominant views of family and women in the 1950s. How did her relationship with Blue stand out?
- What does family mean for you? Are there different kinds of families? What are some family values?
- How do human relationships differ? What changes have taken place in our ideas of families and relationships since the 1950s?
- What issues around 'the family' remain subject to debate today?

ACTIVITIES

- Research. Select one writer from the list below. Do some research on the person and write a brief piece on her life, challenges she has faced as a woman writing and her influence on literature. Include a list of works she has written.

Thea Astley, Margaret Atwood, Emily Dickinson, Joan Didion, Patricia Highsmith, Ursula le Guin, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Iris Murdoch, Sylvia Plath, E. Annie Proulx, Jean Rhys, George Sand, Sappho, Mary Shelley, Gertrude Stein, Amy Tan, Hildegard von Bingen, Elizabeth Wurtzel

■ Poetry. Think of four emotions or ideas you feel/imagine. Then think about how they may look if they were objects—their shape, texture, colours. This may suggest an object that best reflects that emotion or idea. Write a short poem or passage drawing out these sets of thoughts and images.

■ Essay. 'Every woman needs a room of her own.' Discuss this quote with reference to some of the issues raised about gender equality. How does Virginia Woolf's quote relate to other areas of public and private life?

END NOTE

1 Robert N. Linscott (ed), **Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson**. Anchor Doubleday, New York, 1959, p. 7
www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/emilyd/edletter.htm

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Selected Poetry by Elizabeth Riddell

The Difficult Island. Molonglo Press, Deakin, ACT 1994

From the Midnight Courtyard, Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1989

Elizabeth Riddell: Selected Poems, Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1992

Poetry & Women Writers

R. Monaco, **The Logic of Poetry**, McGraw Hill, New York, 1974

The Academy of American Poets—Emily Dickinson <https://www.poets.org/poets/edick>

Jacket—online poetry zine set up by Australian poet, John Tranter
www.jacketmagazine.com/index.html

National Young Writers' Festival <http://youngwritersfestival.org/>

Online zine for women writers
www.womenwriters.net

Virginia Woolf on Women and Fiction website <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/17/specials/woolf-room.html>

Journalism

Australian Centre for Independent Journalism
www.acij.uts.edu.au

Independent Media Center
<http://indymedia.org.au/>



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