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North Shore Times

Stories from our suburbs

Local writers turn Sydney streets, secrets and history into world-class fiction

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Picture: Renee Nowytarger

Novel approach stacks up

As the third Northern Beaches Readers Festival nears, **Mercedes Maguire** talks to founder Sandie Docker and authors whose novels were shaped by Sydney streets, suburbs and shorelines

The night before the first Northern Beaches Readers Festival in 2022, founder Sandie Docker remembers watching anxiously as the ticketing system kept refreshing. She had been told she would be lucky to sell 200 seats for the inaugural event. But already it was getting up to 900. Ticket sales for the next festival in 2024 surpassed 1200 and this year they have blown past that number again.

For a festival born from the idea of bringing together Australian fiction writers — which Docker describes as the only event of its kind in Australia — the response proved readers were eager to hear from the authors whose books accompany them on holidays, at the beach and late into the night.

While many festivals lean towards political books, literary writing and nonfiction, Docker was determined to create one centred on the stories readers most love to sink into.

And it has paid off.

Fifty-two authors from around the country will gather for the third biennial Northern Beaches Readers Festival in Avalon from September 25 to 27, a literary tiramisu of well-known bestsellers like Chris Hammer, Natasha Lester, Jane Caro and Monica McInerney, alongside debut authors who are often forgotten at such events.

"I started this festival because I was getting a little frustrated with other festivals, I always felt like, 'Where are the writers I can curl up in bed with?'" says Docker of Forestville, herself a six-time author. "I was lamenting this and thinking 'someone needs to come up with a festival that really showcases Australian fiction'. That person turned out to be me."

Docker reached out to people she knew could help her pull it together – an ex-lawyer, an ex-journo, a podcaster – and she approached her author friends. Every one of them was keen to be involved. And she committed to shine the spotlight on the genres so often ignored by literary festivals – women's fiction, Australian fiction and romance.

This year, a handful of debut fiction authors will share the stage with established writers. One of them is Glenn Orgias of Bondi, who recently released his first fiction book, Teeth Kicker, into the world. It's a gritty crime novel about a reluctant enforcer working to pay off his debt to a loan shark.

If his name sounds familiar, it should.

In 2009, the Bondi surfer survived an encounter with a great white shark that cost him his left arm. He later wrote about the experience in his 2012 memoir, Man in a Grey Suit, which gave him the confidence to turn to fiction.

"I'm going to be on a panel called The Gritty Underbelly with Matt Nable and Jane Caro, which is just crazy for a debut author like me," he says about appearing alongside the NRL player-turned-writer and the esteemed social commentator and author.

"I'm really looking forward to meeting readers, those who may have read my book and those that may be thinking about it, but I'll also be gushing over some authors I really enjoy reading too, like Matt Nable and Chris Hammer."

While Orgias's book is set in

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From top left: Authors Glenn Orgias, Eleanor Limprecht and Emma Babbington will be at this year's Northern Beaches Readers Festival. Pictures: Renee Nowytarger Inset: Festival founder Sandie Docker (far left) with her own books, and the 2024 event.

Newcastle, it was well and truly born in Bondi. The energy trader spent all his spare time writing it from his car parked in front of Bondi Beach, lulled by the peace of the rolling surf, and from a small table in the second-hand bookshop up the road, Gertrude & Alice.

Jane Turner, the founder and co-owner of Gertrude & Alice, says events like the Northern Beaches Readers Festival are important to help elevate Australian stories, especially at a time when the attention of would-be readers is constantly tugged at by on-demand streaming services, social media and podcasts.

While it's true the fiction best-seller lists in Australia are often dominated by international authors, the appetite for Australian fiction remains strong. About half of the books in the Better Reading Top 100 are by Aussies, as nominated by readers.

And the increasing popularity of events like the Northern Beaches Readers Festival is further validation.

"Aussie authors can struggle in the shadow of international authors," Turner says. "There are some great Australian books that don't get half the recognition of the international ones that come along and take all the attention, like Yesteryear recently did.

"What I love about the (Northern Beaches Readers) Festival is that it is volunteer-based, it's run by authors for authors and readers. And that sense of community is what we need, a nice place to escape the algorithm and listen to diverse discussion about Australian stories."

Like Orgias, Randwick's Eleanor Limprecht has drawn on her local area in two of her five books. Her 2015 novel Long Bay grew from a batch of letters uncovered in an archive and the mug shot of a female prisoner.

Learning that nearby Long Bay prison had once housed the Women's Penitentiary helped shape her story of a female abortionist.

She returned to local history for her 2022 novel The Coast, inspired by her discovery of the Coast Hospital at Little Bay, which once housed a leprosy colony in the early 20th century.

"I'm so fascinated by the history around here, there's so much that is unrecognised in our suburbs," she says.

"The stories of real people who lived right here that are so often forgotten are so interesting to me."

Limprecht, whose latest book, Cul-de-Sac, came out in August, will speak on a panel titled Picture Imperfect about the high expectations society places on women, and what happens when they fail to meet them.

Emma Babbington may hail from the UK, but it was the now-Sydney-based author's Cammeray backyard that inspired her to write her first novel, The Neighbours, last year.

It follows the fallout after the body of a celebrity doctor is found in a harbourside park, which was inspired by Tunks Park, on the border between Northbridge and Cammeray.

"I used to go walking there every single day before work during lockdown and my imagination would just go wild, especially in the bush track to Flat Rock Gully," she says. "It's pretty dark and atmospheric, and I just thought it was the perfect place to put my dead body."

Babbington, whose new book, The Gardens, came out in August, has attended the last two festivals as a book l, but this time she is participating in a panel discussion aptly named Home is Where the Crime Is, alongside fellow crime writers Michael Robotham and Kate Horan.

It's one of 25 sessions during the festival, which this year includes interviews with established authors like Chris Hammer, Natasha Lester and Monica McInerney and panel discussions on topics like the unusual places writers set their stories, the darker side of technology, plots that play with the convention of time and the new direction writers are taking the romance genre.

"We have incredible talent here, we have world-class authors in every fiction genre," Docker says. "Yet we don't always give them the platform, they are always overshadowed by international authors. If we want to continue to tell Aussie stories, we have to platform them, we need to champion them."

The Northern Beaches Readers Festival runs from September 25 to 27 at the Avalon Recreation Centre. Tickets at nbrf.com.au