

Deadly Ernestine

by **Fin J Ross**

The Melbourne Athenaeum's
Body in the Library Prize (\$1000)

as well as:

International Association of
Forensic Linguists Award (\$1000)

Simon & Schuster Second Prize (\$1000)
(Scarlet Stiletto Award)

Deadly Ernestine

It was another one of those Monday mornings that conspired against me. I had to be on campus for a ten o'clock tutorial but Zeus himself seemed determined to throw every possible obstacle at me. My kettle had had a conniption so I was coffee-less, Fudge had vomited green bile stuff all over my tutorial papers and then I'd broken a heel on the front steps requiring a total wardrobe change as I had no other shoes to match my outfit. The first two trams on St Kilda Road were chockers and then it started to rain. What else could go wrong?

Everything, as it turned out.

Now, the tram was stopped in Swanston Street to allow an ambulance and a convoy of police cars to turn east into Collins Street. An accident? A terrorist attack? I sent a message to the senior lecturer to explain my tardiness. ETA 10.30am. Whoever dreamed up Monday morning tutorials should be clobbered with a dictionary—a big one. Hell, half the students were usually still asleep, or hung-over, or both.

Three hours later, I was sitting in my office eating a limp egg sandwich from the Uni cafeteria, when someone knocked on the door. God, couldn't I get a minute's peace from my students? I opened the door to be confronted by two policemen, a sergeant and a senior-constable. Surely this was overkill for an unpaid parking fine.

'You are Alison Jordan?' the sergeant asked.

'Yes.' I eyed them both warily. 'What's this about?'

'You are acquainted with Ernestine Grey?'

'Ernestine? Yes. Why, what's the matter?'

'I am sorry to inform you that she has been found dead.'

'Oh my God. How? Where?'

'A staff member found her body in the library this morning.'

'At the Athenaeum?' That explained the emergency up Collins Street.

The sergeant nodded. 'Perhaps you should sit down.'

I plonked into my chair. Shell-shocked and fighting back tears. Ernestine Grey was an institution at the Athenaeum Library; as much a part of its fabric as the stucco on its three-storey façade. Since retiring as Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics at Melbourne University twenty-two years ago, she had become a stalwart at the library. Not as a paid employee; more as the go-to person for patrons with language-related enquiries. 'Was it...natural causes?'

'No. Naturally we are still investigating, but there was,' he paused, 'a suicide note.'

'No. No way. There's no way Ernestine would commit suicide.'

'You knew her well then?'

'We have been good friends for maybe ten years. I met her at the library. Mutual interests, you know. She was a professor in linguistics here, though long before my time. But she was like a grandmother, and mentor I guess, to me.'

'When did you see her last?'

'Last Thursday night. I went to her place every week to play Scrabble, talk languages, talk books. She loved my visits, and not just for the regular bottle of sherry, though being diabetic she probably shouldn't have drunk it.'

'And what was her state of mind then?'

'Fine. She was in fine form. Three times she laid out seven-letter words. She always won. She was telling me all about a trip she was planning to Europe. So, as I said, there's no way she would commit suicide. How did...she?'

'Shot herself in the head.'

'What?' *Not likely.* 'No way. Besides, where would an eighty-six-year-old woman get a gun?'

'We have yet to establish that. Are you aware that she had terminal cancer?'

Oh, just hit me with more shit. My shoulders sagged. 'No. She didn't tell me that. But she was never one to complain.'

'She mentioned it in her note and we have established it from her doctor. Metastatic breast cancer.'

'Oh shit. Poor darling.' That was almost worse to bear than the fact that she was now dead anyway. 'She never said a thing. The note. Can I see it?'

'We were intending for you to accompany us to the library. Detective Senior-Sergeant Loddon wants to speak to you, given that she mentioned you by name in the note.'

'She did?'

We pulled up down the street a bit from the Athenaeum and, as usual, I paid homage to Athena before dashing under the cover of the veranda to avoid getting thoroughly drenched. The sergeant raised the crime scene tape for me to duck underneath and led me inside. It was familiar territory, of course, but I'd never entered its portal with such a heavy feeling. The scene, as we entered the library and reading room was both sombre and frenetic. Forensics detectives and a host of uniform officers and detectives milled about, mostly near the ten-seater table

where I'd spent so much time reading and where I'd first met Ernie.

I tried to get a glimpse of her. Was she still here? Yes. There she slumped over the table, her delicate silver hair congealed with blood. A spray of it across the table. She surely couldn't have done this to herself. I clung momentarily to the bolstered column, feeling a bit light-headed.

The sergeant supported my elbow. 'Might be best if you don't see that.' He guided me around to where a greying detective sat in a tub chair at a small round table. He stood and shook my hand.

'Miss Jordan, thank you for coming. Detective Senior-Sergeant Jim Loddon. Homicide.' He pointed at the seat beside him.

I nodded and sat.

'I can't believe it,' I blurted. 'I told the sergeant that I don't believe she killed herself.'

'But she wrote a note. And the gun is still in her hand.'

'So I understand but I still don't believe it. And if you're from Homicide, what does that tell me?'

'It's usual procedure for us to be called if there's a firearm involved.'

'Can I see the note?'

'In a moment. Just some questions first.'

In answer to his first question, I iterated my last encounter with Ernie.

‘She never mentioned the cancer though, now I come to think of it, she did seem a little distracted.’

‘In what way?’

I thought through the scenario. ‘We were playing Scrabble and the phone rang. She took it into her bedroom but I could hear her raising her voice. She looked a bit rattled when she came back out but she didn’t say anything. We carried on playing.’

‘Do you know who it was? And what time?’

‘Don’t know who it was but it would have been about 9.30. I thought it a bit odd that somebody would ring her that late.’

‘We will, of course, check her phone record. See who it was. Do you know any of her relatives?’

‘She doesn’t have any. She never married, and her last remaining nephew died last year I think. How long has she been here? Since Saturday?’ Here, alone, all that time. Again, I fought back tears.

Loddon nodded. ‘We haven’t ascertained how she came to still be here after the library closed at two o’clock. The staffer who locked up isn’t working today. I’m waiting for the guys to bring her in.’

‘Helen Caulfield?’ *Did she have something to do with this?*

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, I’ve just had a thought. Poor Bolshoi.’

‘Bolshoi?’

‘That’s her cat. He’s a Russian Blue and Ernie loved the ballet. He’ll have been shut inside for two days.’

‘My guys will look after him when they get there.’

‘Thanks. But tell them to make sure he doesn’t get out, or he’ll do a runner.’

Loddon turned over the paper on the table. ‘Don’t touch it.’

I nodded and read. Ernie had such perfect writing; beautiful script and always in fountain pen.

I can go on no longer. Theirs nothing I can do. The pain is killing me. It has been worse since the Commencement of my treatment programme. Having diabeties is bad enough, but now cancer. Only those close to me will understand. Well, I have had a good life. And so I choose to die here. Here among the books I so treasure. The books, that have defined my life, are on these shelves. A life devoted to Reading and further understanding is not a life wasted. I apologise to whomever finds me. My Dying wish is that it not be Alison Jordan.

Ernestene Grey

So many things were wrong with this. I reread it and then read it again.

‘I can tell you one thing, Ernie did not write this voluntarily. Yes, it’s her hand-writing, but there’s at least seven clues here that tell me—and maybe me alone—that she wrote it under duress.’

‘You believe somebody compelled her to write it?’

I nodded. ‘She was a languages and linguistics professor. What she didn’t know about languages wasn’t worth knowing. And she was such a stickler for correct spelling and grammar she could not have written this unless ... she had a gun to her head.’

‘Clues?’

‘Yes. See here. For starters, she most definitely knew the difference between there, their, and they’re so there’s no way she’d have written “theirs nothing I can do”. The lack of an apostrophe is another dead giveaway.’

‘Secondly, Ernie is, or should I say was, American, so under no circumstances would she spell program with the additional “me”.’

Loddon looked dubious.

‘Okay, third, she would never use the word “commence”. She started out as a journalist and journalists avoid using commence where possible. Only ever start or begin,

depending on the context. Fourth, having been diabetic for fifty years, she would know it’s not spelled that way. Am I convincing you yet?’

‘She might not have been entirely rational. She *was* eighty-six—’

I gave him my best withering look. ‘Ernie’s mind was sharper than a stiletto. Better than most thirty-year-olds.’

‘So that’s four clues.’

‘Ah, but there’s more. She was of the old school, the one that said you should never start a sentence with “and”.’

I studied the note again. ‘And then, there’s the fact that she has used the object form here—“whomever”, instead of the subject form, “whoever”. She would never make that mistake.’

Loddon looked like half the students in my VCE English class; disinterested and perplexed. He was about to speak when I raised my hand.

‘Then, there’s her signature. In case you hadn’t noticed, she misspelled her own name. Ernestene with an “E”.’

Loddon finally looked like he might be convinced. ‘So, you think she was murdered?’

‘I can’t imagine who would want to kill such a sweet darling but yes, I believe she was murdered.’

‘Well that puts a whole new slant on things.’

Loddon beckoned to another detective. When the man approached, Loddon said to him, ‘Get the forensics guys to check for trace evidence. I think we’re looking at murder here, not suicide’.

‘A couple of other things are bugging me about that note, but I can’t put a finger on them at the moment. Any chance I could get a copy of it?’

‘It’s not the done thing, you realise, but then you have already been a big help to the investigation.’ Loddon had a constable run off a copy of the note and handed it to me with his own card. ‘Please contact me if you come up with anything else’.

I was back at my desk but no way could I concentrate on my notes for tomorrow’s lecture. I pulled Ernie’s note from my bag and studied it again. There it was; the other thing I’d missed—her use of the word “that”. *The books, that have defined my life, are on these shelves.* Only a grammar Nazi would discern the subtle difference between using “that” and “which”. Firstly, in this type of sentence, “that” would not be prefaced by a comma and

“that” made it a defining clause, which intimated that only the books on the library shelves defined her life. Yet she had an incredible library at home. Had she written “which”, I might not have picked up on it, as it would have been grammatically correct. But something else was there staring me in the face. I just wasn’t picking up on it. I needed coffee. Coffee always did the trick.

I returned to my office ten minutes later with a double-shot long black and scanned the page again. There it was. The peculiar use of capitalised letters. Commencement, Reading, Dying. CRD. What was she trying to tell me? Didn’t mean anything to me. I read it again. It was then the letters jumped off the page. Commencement, Only, Well, And, Reading, Dying.

C.O.W.A.R.D.

My hair stood on end. Snatches of a conversation came to mind. Back in June, when the news report revealed that Anthony Bourdain had hanged himself. *You’d have to be brave to hang yourself*, I’d said. *No*, she’d said, *suicide is for cowards. You’d never see me do it.*

So now, was she telling me she *had* resorted to cowardice...or that she definitely didn’t? *You’d never see me do it.* The latter, surely. Should I ring Loddon? It was nearly knock-off time. I’d ring him from home.

I alighted the tram in Fitzroy St and decided to brave the weather and walk the few blocks down Canterbury Rd to Ernie's house in Middle Park. Chances were that Loddon would be there. He'd mentioned that they'd be checking out her house. It would be awful, her not being there to greet me with her sparkling blue eyes and wicked wit.

Loddon was there, along with a half-dozen other detectives, some of whom were going door-to-door to speak to Ernie's neighbours. Loddon allowed me inside, though naturally I was instructed not to touch anything. Bolshoi came out of hiding and greeted me with his usual figure-eights around my legs.

'Good timing,' Loddon said, 'it transpires that none of her neighbours knew her very well or, at least, have never been inside. Maybe you can give us an idea whether anything is out of place. The lady next door said she was pretty sure that a man had come to visit on Friday night, but it was too dark for her to get a look at him. Any idea who that might have been?'

I shook my head. 'Maybe the same person who rang Thursday night. Did you get to speak to Helen?'

'She's pretty shaken up. Blaming herself.'

'Why?'

'She was in a hurry to leave to get to a party on Saturday. She said Miss Grey offered to lock up for her because she was still busy helping a man with some research or something.'

'A man?'

'She only saw him from the back. Fifty or sixtyish, she thought, and balding. Ring any bells?'

'No. I'd sure like to know who he was though.'

'You and me both. Obviously, it's our first line of enquiry.'

I surveyed Ernie's lounge room. Nothing seemed out of place. All was as it had been on Thursday night, the Scrabble board still on the dining table. The forensics guys were dusting the room for prints.

'We might need to get your finger-prints, just to rule them out as foreign.'

'Yeah, sure.' Then it dawned on me. Something *was* missing. The book. 'Have you come across an old book? A dictionary about yay big, with a beaten-up leather cover?'

Loddon shook his head. 'Amongst all *those* books?' he said, pointing to the floor-to-ceiling bookshelf that lined the wall.

'No. She showed it to me on Thursday. It was on the coffee table. Very valuable, I believe. She bought it many years ago in Paris, but said she'd decided to sell it.'

‘Maybe she needed the money. Cancer treatment doesn’t come cheap.’

‘We could check her computer. Maybe she’d already advertised it. May I?’ I said, heading toward the niche she used as her home office. I opened the lid of her laptop and switched it on. ‘Oh, password.’

‘Do you know it?’

‘No. But I can probably guess.’ I typed ‘Athena’ into the box and her home screen opened.

‘Good guess,’ Loddon said.

I searched her browser history and clicked on “Antiquarities”. Evidently a site for rare antiquarian book sales. I scrolled through two or three pages before I found it.

‘There it is. And “Greyem” is a likely seller name for her.’ I read it aloud in my best French. *‘Dictionnaire Chinois, Français et Latin. Publié d’après l’ordre de sa majesté L’Empereur et Roi Napoléon le Grand.’*

‘Translate please.’

‘Okay. So it’s a Chinese, French and Latin dictionary, written by Chrétien Louis Joseph de Guignes, and published at the order of Napoleon.’

‘Bonaparte?’

‘The one and only. It’s a first edition. Printed 1813.

She’s got it advertised for \$16,500.’

Loddon whistled. ‘Phew.’

‘My guess is someone wanted it but maybe didn’t want to pay the price.’

‘Certainly worth looking into.’

‘I know you probably can’t tell me, but did you trace that phone call?’

‘A mobile, evidently purchased under a false name. But whoever it was, had rung three nights in a row.’

‘Someone was harassing her then.’

‘Looks like it.’

‘Oh.’ I pulled my copy of the suicide note from my pocket. ‘I found a couple more clues. Perhaps a very big one.’

I explained my findings to Loddon and he agreed that the coward reference was most likely Ernie’s way of telling us she was not about to kill herself.

I was just about to go to bed, when the doorbell rang. I was surprised to see Loddon on the porch. ‘Oh, hi. Have you found something out?’ I invited him in.

‘I’m sorry to bother you so late. But I have to ask you where you were on Saturday afternoon.’

‘Why?’ *What?* I could feel my eyes dilate. ‘Am I a suspect?’

‘Please just tell me where you were.’

'I was at my parents in Torquay for the weekend. Left here Friday night, left there Sunday night.'

'And they will verify this?'

'Of course.'

'I'm sorry. I have no doubt that's true but it is usual practice to question the beneficiaries of murder victims.'

'But...I'm not a beneficiary.'

'Yes, as it happens, you are. Miss Grey revised her will a month ago, upon the cancer diagnosis, according to her solicitor. She has bequeathed her whole estate to you.'

'Holy cow. I didn't know.' My mouth was still gaping.

Loddon's eyes softened. 'No. I don't believe you did.'

I barely slept. Spent the whole night thinking about the fear Ernie must have felt. There, with a gun to her head, and no way of escaping it. There, with that incisive, academic, wonderful brain splattered across the reading table. So violent and incomprehensible. I would so miss our get-togethers. Aside from tomes about linguistics, the arts, politics and history, crime novels were Ernie's go to reading. And me too. We exchanged books all the time. Now I felt like we were the protagonists in our own murder mystery. In a selfish way, I'd have preferred her to die of cancer. At least then, I could have visited more

often, nursed her when needed, given her comfort. Told her how much I loved her. But some bastard robbed me of the chance. I felt as though I had been violated too. And the old sausage left me everything. I'd never bargained on that. And it looked like beautiful, slinky Bolshoi, who'd spent the night on my chest purring like a motor bike, was mine now too.

A week went by in a blur of study for my Doctorate and half-hearted lectures, all the while hoping there'd be news that Ernie's murderer had been arrested. I'd done as much as I could think of to help, but I'd had just one call from Loddon which was more to ask whether I'd heard any goss, than to tell me anything he might have unearthed. It seemed they hadn't got anywhere with their enquiries. I hoped Ernie's murder wouldn't turn into one of those unsolved cases that would languish on the homicide squad's files until such time as somebody got bored and thought to look into it again. After all, eighty-six-year-olds died every day didn't they?

I headed down the corridor of the School of Languages and Linguistics, past the imposing honour boards, intent on getting some fresh air and a bite

to eat over at the cafeteria. But something made me stop dead. I backed up a couple of paces and stared at one of the boards. I'd walked past them hundreds of times and never really paid much attention to them. There it was.

Dr Graeme Coward, Lecturer in French Studies, 1998-2007. *Coward*. She'd given me his name, I just hadn't twigged. I raced back up the hall to Angela's office. She'd been around here long enough to have known him. I popped my head in the door.

'Hi Ange. Tell me, do you remember Graeme Coward?'

'Sure do.' She rolled her eyes.

'What?'

'Nut job.'

'Really? Why?'

'Let's just say he had a propensity for wandering hands and inappropriate behaviour. But I went into his office one day and found him smelling and licking a book. He was politely asked to leave the faculty about ten years ago.'

'Is he still around? Do you know?'

'Last I heard he was tutoring part time at Monash, and hopefully keeping his hands to himself. Though somebody mentioned him to me the other day. Said they'd bumped into him and he looked pretty crook.'

'So Ernestine would have known him?'

'For sure, although I don't recall them being buddy-buddy. She was much too clever. Besides, he didn't mingle much. Always too busy with his bloody books. Poor Ernestine. It's just awful what happened.'

'Yes, tragic. Any idea where he lives?'

Angela thought for a moment. 'Um...Elsternwick, Caulfield. Somewhere around there.'

'Thanks. Must catch up for a drink some time.'

'Yeah. See you.'

I rummaged through my bag for Loddon's card. Started to dial his number as I headed outside, then changed my mind. First I Googled Monash University and dialled that number instead. After that enlightening conversation, and after I looked up the White Pages and got Coward's address, I rang Loddon.

'I think I've found us a suspect,' I said, once he'd acknowledged who I was.

'Yes. I'm all ears.'

'I'll meet you at 31 Gillespie St, Elsternwick, in fifteen minutes.' I gave him no chance to reply. Didn't want him to talk me out of going there. I was glad I'd driven to work instead of catching the tram. It would save a lot of waiting and walking.

I pulled up in front of number 31, an immaculate Edwardian weatherboard with an attractive hedged garden. I waited until Loddon's car appeared behind me and he and another detective got out.

'So what's the story? Are you trying to do our job for us?'

'This is the home of one Doctor Graeme Coward, lecturer in languages and linguistics at Monash, who, I gather, has quite the collection of rare books.'

Loddon raised his eyebrows. 'What makes you think he's at home?'

'I rang Monash. He wasn't there. The faculty receptionist said he hadn't been for over a week. I got the impression no-one cared enough to find out where he was.'

'You really are doing our work for us.'

'Sorry. Yeah.'

I followed them up the path.

'Might be best if you stay outside,' Loddon instructed. He and the other detective climbed the steps and knocked on the front door. I, nosey Parker that I am, peered through the gap below the blind in the front window. The room was beautifully furnished with antiques. But there, protruding from behind a Rococo coffee table was a hand, flat on the carpet.

'Think you might need to call an ambulance,' I said. 'I think he's on the floor.'

Loddon was beside me immediately. He peered through and grabbed his radio to make the call, then directed his colleague, Jerry, to force the door.

'You, stay there. Wait for the ambulance,' he said to me. I looked through the window again. There, on the coffee table, was Ernie's dictionary, though it looked greener than I remembered. I saw Loddon bend down to feel the pulse on the wrist, which I presumed was attached to Coward's body. He shook his head at Jerry. Jerry spoke into his radio, but I couldn't hear what he said. Loddon approached the window and pulled up the blind. I pointed to the book and he nodded. He looked at it closely, without touching it.

Before long, the place was swarming with police and forensics guys, among whom was a woman, which pleased me no end. I sat on the front porch feeling like one of those sideshow clowns you pop ping-pong balls into as I watched the comings and goings. Loddon emerged with the dictionary in a huge plastic evidence bag.

'Is this it?'

'I think so. But I thought it was brown, not green.'

'The green appears to be some sort of residue.'

It'll be taken to the forensics lab for analysis. It certainly connects Coward to Miss Grey. Good work you. You should be a detective.'

I laughed. Coming from a Homicide veteran, that was quite the compliment. 'Oh, yeah. I'm a regular Miss Marple. Do they have any clue yet how he died?'

'There'll be an autopsy. I wouldn't want to speculate. But there's no sign of foul play. Of course, if it turns out to not be natural causes, there'll be a Coronial Inquest.'

'Do you think he's the guy from the library on Saturday?'

'Good chance. He's fifty-something and balding.'

Loddon rang a few days later. 'The autopsy revealed that Coward had severe liver disease, but that wasn't the immediate cause of death. He was poisoned...with arsenic.'

'Shit.' I couldn't contain my surprise. All I could think of was the classic movie, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. 'The green stuff on the dictionary?'

'Yep.'

'Do you think Ernie put it there? I can't imagine her doing that.'

'Look, if she did—and we're not speculating at this time that she did—then all I can say is, good for her.'

She probably didn't mean to kill him. It's doubtful such a small amount of poison would have killed him if he didn't have pre-existing liver disease. And we have no way of determining whether she knew about his condition. Besides, any crying for him would be crocodile tears.'

'Yes, I've heard about his proclivity for roaming hands among his students.'

'Hmm, that and the fact that he had a penchant for antiquarian books he didn't intend to pay for. We've traced a couple of other books from Coward's collection to an unsolved murder in Adelaide a year ago.'

'You're kidding.'

'No. We've been able to place him in Adelaide at the time of the guy's death. Dumb bugger had left the book plates with the victim's name on them inside the covers. So, we suspect that Miss Grey told him on Friday night that the book was at the library and told him to meet her there Saturday. She must have known that he was prepared to have it at all costs, so she took it somewhere public where she'd feel safe. Chances are that Coward had the gun trained on her without Helen Caulfield seeing it, and that Ernie was too altruistic to let on to Helen, to avoid risking her life too.'

‘That, I can believe. God, imagine her knowing that he might kill her for it. I can’t bear to think about it.’

Ernie, Ernie, why didn’t you tell me?

‘It will all probably come out in the Inquest. September, it’s set for.’

I thanked Loddon for the call and was about to hang up when he interrupted me.

‘Oh, there’s another reason I rang.’

‘Yes?’

‘Ever thought of branching into forensic linguistics? We could sure use somebody with your talent and expertise.’

‘No. I hadn’t. But now you’ve got me thinking.’ Might beat lectures and endless papers. Might pay better too.

It wasn’t until four months later, after Ernie’s estate had passed through probate and her house was legally mine, that I could face the ordeal of going through her belongings to sort what I would keep. Her book collection was a given, of course, but many of her other personal effects were, well, old and crusty and set for the op-shop. Bolshoi thought the packing boxes were his playground. Also a given were her original paintings; a dozen or so oils, pastels and watercolours which adorned the walls.

I’d packed her Scrabble game into a “keep” box. It would be a long time until it would see the light of day again. Playing with anyone else would feel like a betrayal.

I stepped into the tiny bungalow out back, her erstwhile art studio when she was of a bent to crack out the paints. The shelves were coated in dust. It had been a long time since she’d ventured out here. What to do with all this stuff? Maybe take it to a local art society? I’d come armed with boxes, so I started the process of clearing the shelves of brushes, paints, tubes, canvasses, palettes and partly-finished works. I pulled a couple of spray cans of fixative off a shelf and noticed a rusted green tin behind. Looked like it belonged in a museum. I read the label. Berger’s Pure Paris Green. But it was the word POISON, written in red capitals, which really caught my eye.

I pulled out my phone and Googled it. *Bloody hell*. A painter’s pigment used by the likes of Renoir, Monet, Cézanne, Van Gogh. But also used as an insecticide. Highly toxic. Being a dill at chemistry, I couldn’t comprehend the chemical formula, but the words *copper (II) acetate and arsenic trioxide* told me all I needed to know. It was more irony than coincidence—that her greedy murderer died the same way Napoleon Bonaparte did.

I laughed out loud. ‘Ernestine Grey. You canny old cow.’

Fin J Ross

“Deadly Ernestine”

Journalist, Fin J Ross, is co-author of two true-crime anthologies, *Killer in the Family* and *Murder in the Family*. Fin has two novels, *Billings Better Bookstore and Brasserie* and *Wildwood Hall* looking for a publishing home and is currently writing her first crime novel.

Fin has won several awards in short story competitions, including, three category prizes and a third prize in previous Scarlet Stiletto Awards.

She teaches creative writing in Paynesville in regional Victoria – to maintain her sanity – but derives her income from running a boarding cattery in Eagle Point and breeding Bengal and British Shorthair cats.