

What Kate *did next*

By Caroline Baum



Fresh back from three months in Europe, Kate Holden is enjoying being at home in Austinmer with her partner, Tim Flannery, and their son.

The compact house they built on a sloping bush block is now becoming a home, the unpacking phase over. It's time for a bit of nesting and contemplation after the surprise of winning a Walkley award for her first venture into environmental investigative journalism with *The Winter Road* – which also won the 2022 NSW Premier's Award for non-fiction and the 2022 Davitt Award for non-fiction.

The Winter Road is a complex account of the murder of environmental compliance officer Glen Turner by farmer Ian Turnbull at Croppa Creek near Moree in 2014. The crime attracted national interest and headlines, and was seen as

something of a watershed moment in the conflict between those seeking to protect the land from excessive clearing and those who live from agriculture.

"I'd never written anything that required that kind of research," says Kate, sounding still a little astonished by her win. "I found it exciting to discern patterns in our history and make connections between the past and the present. A huge chunk of the book was discarded as my manuscript was much bigger, but these days, people's attention span is shorter."

She wants to stay with inquiring essay writing, and is considering what her next project might be. Two issues keep humming in her very curious and observant brain.

"One is the transition this area is undergoing,



Kate Holden at home in Austinmer with her husband, climate scientist and author Tim Flannery. Photos: Anthony Warry



which is apparent to me every day, the potential future conflicts over development and change, the contemporary dilemmas we face and how they are richly informed by the past.

"The other is my dismay as a mother of a nine-year-old with the education system in our public schools. My education was so different. My mother started an alternative school with just 30 pupils in all. Learning was play-based, it never felt like a chore, it was enriching.

"The system here is so constricted, regulation is so oppressive. I've seen people here defeated trying to start a nature school featuring outdoor learning. It's a real shame."

It's been 17 years since Kate published her first memoir, *In My Skin*, a candid account of her personal experiences in the hidden world of heroin

use and prostitution, a story of survival that she can still tell anecdotes from with a gleam of provocation and pride – certainly no shame – in her eye. It's fair to say that nothing about addiction or desire shocks her.

"Writing that opened up the power of emotional honesty to me. Sometimes memoir feels selfish and ruthless but it is also an act of generosity and you never know how it will resonate. It gave me a career but also I still get responses to it from readers."

That willingness to expose and excavate her own past with penetrating insight makes her in demand as a teacher of creative non-fiction at the South Coast Writers Centre and festivals around the country.

Since moving away from memoir, a strong streak of idealism and activism permeates Holden's sense of purpose as a writer. "I want to contribute to the greater good. Sometimes everything feels either grim or frivolous."

She is not attracted to public office, preferring to leave that role to others with more time and skills – she confesses to being a bit phobic when it comes to meetings and committees.

As well as her progressive, radical values, Kate is trying to maintain a spiritual commitment to "enchantment and re-enchantment: to fighting the soporific haze, fatigued indifference and to heal ourselves with a sense of awe, blessedness and small magic, reminding ourselves of beauty, the sublime and mystery as an antidote to late stage capitalist neoliberalism and its appalling reductive policies".

Nothing too woo-woo, mind you. Kate's wafty sentiments stay anchored to reality. She maintains her optimism by interviewing a wide range of creative individuals for her regular column in *The Saturday Paper*, and from quieter more contemplative moments when she is doing something craft-based, or spending time in the bush, or everyday domestic rituals.

Asked about what she cherishes most at the moment, she pauses to consider.

"The escarpment and the sense of enclosure that our home provides, with its back to the cliff, snug and out of danger. It was such a good experience building it with Tim and collaborating with the builder, Shane Simpson, and his crew.

"But also I think that this is a pretty special, pretty cool community we have here. There's such an abundance of talent, I'm grateful to be part of it."

Kate Holden is the keynote speaker at 'I Am Not Making This Up', a festival of true storytelling at Coledale Community Hall on November 26 and 27. Tickets from \$15 at southcoastwriters.org ✨