

## **SIOBHAN McHUGH**

### **MY STORY: SNOWY – the diary of EVA FISCHER**

I was one of three writers in the Scholastic ‘My Story’ series on a panel about history and truth in children’s fiction. My book, *The Diary of Eva Fischer*, describes a year in the life of an eleven year-old girl whose family move to a construction town in the Snowy Mountains where her father works on the huge hydro-electric scheme.

I was approached to write the book because I had already written a social history of the Snowy Mountains scheme (*The Snowy: The People Behind The Power*). I had interviewed over a hundred people for the adult book, and had a smorgasbord of stories, characters and colourful detail to draw on.

The Snowy scheme was epic in size and scope and the human drama was equally immense. There were visionaries, mercenaries, rebels and refugees, friends and foes, danger and death, romance and racism, love, loss, heroism, humour and horror. All I had to do was to fictionalise the stories and tell them in a diary format through the eyes of Eva, a city girl transplanted to the bush. Easy!

Of course it was much more complex than I’d expected. Eva fell into place almost fully formed, a spirited and enquiring lass who never took no for an answer. In no time she’d made friends with Lizzie, the best tobogganer-on-a-baking-dish for miles round. Eva’s dad, Walter, was German, which caused Eva some grief, as she shared the hostility he encountered. Her mother, Harriet, was a doctor, treating everything from measles to multiple trauma following a tunnel explosion. (Harriet was largely based on a real-life White Russian woman, a smoking, drinking larrikin whose children I interviewed for the history – and they really did use baking dishes as toboggans. Walter was a composite of several

Germans I met, and the story of their refugee-camp romance was borrowed from a Czech hydrographer.)

The other main characters materialised readily from the dozens I'd interviewed: Luciano, the charming Italian miner saving to buy a house for his young wife, Francesca; Mr Brown, the tough American boss who drives the work along at a dangerous rate; Dean, his lonely, spoilt son; the Hegartys, whose home at Adaminaby was to be drowned by the new dam; and Francesca, whom Eva cunningly gets her mother to employ as a cook.

The plot was multi-layered: part bush adventure, part migrant journey, part social justice. Eva's dad, a surveyor, foresees the dangers of speed-tunnelling, but Luciano is more concerned with money and machismo than his own safety. Eva's friendship with Lizzie is threatened when it's revealed that their dads fought each other at Tobruk in the war, but the wounds are eventually healed. Eva and Lizzie undertake a secret mission to stop a Hegarty heirloom from being inundated, and Dean redeems himself in the process. Francesca opens Eva's eyes to the joy of pasta and pizza, while Lizzie's dad, a horseman, passes on his bushlore, enabling the girls to survive a blizzard. The tension in the tunnel culminates in a horrific accident, which changes Mr Brown and vindicates Walter.

Most of those stories were based on real events, as were many of the embellishments – e.g. when Prime Minister Robert Menzies opens the power station, the ice in his VIP drink has been chipped out of the frozen-over horse trough. But some I added myself – like Eva's first attempt to make her own pizza. The dough kneaded, she places it in a bowl and puts it in the still-warm clothes dryer to prove – whereupon the dryer starts turning, and they end up with ham, cheese and lint pizza. That detail came from my own experience – but I did check that an automatic washer/dryer (the Turner) had been imported to Melbourne in

1956, and so could quite feasibly have been part of a doctor's house in 1958.

The diary format was good and bad. Good, in that it provided structure, and forced me to curtail my tendency to write reams. I could only do a few pages at most before Eva would get tired, and some days she only wrote a line or two. Bad, because continuity had to be maintained, events signposted and followed through, seasonal issues taken care of. I turned Eva into a horse-lover and had her off riding with Lizzie most days, and when the first draft of the manuscript came back, it was full of little post-it stickers from the efficient editor, Margrete Lamond, with dry messages like 'I note the horses haven't been fed for three months'.

But in the end, story, characters, setting and format came together in a liberating blend of fact and fiction. For me, being able to invent things was a heady delight: I gave Dean's separated parents a romantic reunion, even writing a country music song to spark it. Who cares if it was unrealistic – what's fiction for! But I also derived great satisfaction from imparting, in an entertaining and interesting way, important knowledge about one of the great coming-of-age projects in Australian history. I appended comprehensive historical notes explaining where truth ended and fiction began. But the Snowy story was never just a construction story – it was a huge emotional journey, built on mateship, vision and endurance, which forged the multicultural nation we have today. I was thrilled when an online review by a thirteen-year-old clearly grasped the subliminal concepts in Eva's story. 'It deals with many issues, such as racism, loyalty, arrogant people and trying new things', wrote Brianna. My most treasured review came in the post, in smudged blue biro. 'Usually I just skip through books, but since I read the first two pages of *Snowy*, it seems that I've gotten addicted to it. Thank you for showing me that there are some books that are not boring. From Taiya.'

Thank YOU Taiya, thanks to Scholastic for the great *My Story* format - a fun way to impart history – and thanks to the CBCA and the enthusiastic and engaged audience for hearing me out.

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