



Family fact and fiction are melded into a rich Australian story, writes **Phil Brown**

FAMILY history and a visit to Australia by a famous English writer are among the elements that have inspired Brisbane author Ashley Hay.

Her new novel, *The Railwayman's Wife*, is a moving story of characters living in a small town on the south coast of New South Wales after World War II. The town happens to be Thirroul, where Hay's grandparents lived and where, coincidentally, English novelist D.H. Lawrence set and wrote *Kangaroo*, his enigmatic novel about Australia published in 1923 – the year after his Australian sojourn.

Hay grew up at Austinmer, the next seaside village along from Thirroul, and the landscape Lawrence described so beautifully in his book is the same one she writes about so compellingly. A sense of place is paramount in her exquisitely crafted novel, which falls comfortably

between big L literature and popular fiction.

Hay, who is 42, loves the Lawrence connection.

"And he wrote so beautifully about the landscape, which is basically a thin strip between the coast and the Illawarra Escarpment," Hay says.

"He was only there for a few months in 1922 but he really captured the place. I read *Kangaroo* when I was in high school and the Lawrence visit and book is a background theme in my novel."

The fact that Lawrence ended up in tiny Thirroul, of all places, intrigues and delights Hay and adds literary weight to the setting.

The other influences she cites are various aspects of family history that infuse her narrative. The strongest element is the railway that runs through the town.

In her novel, local woman Anika

Lachlan gets a job at the local Railway Institute Library after her husband is killed in a shunting accident.

Here she meets two war veterans: Roy McKinnon, a poet with a talent for unrequited love, and Frank Draper, a doctor. Both men are visitors to the library where Anika ends up working. Both men are scarred by their war service, particularly Draper, who served as a medico in the liberated concentration camps and suffers guilt over his inability to save many of the doomed inmates.

Like much in Hay's book, all this was suggested by real events that have percolated in her subconscious.

"Years ago somebody told me a story about a doctor who had come home from the war and who had been into the camps in Germany. They said he was never the same afterwards and that interested me," Ashley says.





The Railwayman's Wife

Ashley Hay
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Another element inspired by real life is the tragedy that strikes Anika.

"My own grandmother was a Railway Institute librarian and became one after her husband was killed on the railways," Hay explains.

"This is not her story but I was captivated by the idea of this widow working with the sound and presence of the railway outside, the very thing that had killed her husband."

Hay's novel is set in 1948, a year when "things were still tough".

"The war was over but there was

still rationing and the psychological scars were still very raw. I wanted to write about the war after the war," she says.

Hay tells her story in crisp, clear prose. Put that down, perhaps, to her training as a journalist. She has written for a number of newspapers and magazines in Australia and the UK, and was once a staff writer at *The Bulletin* magazine, a now-defunct publication that had a long literary tradition.

Her first book, *The Secret*, published in 2001, was about Lord Byron and she concentrated on non-fiction until the publication of her first novel, *The Body in The Clouds* (2010), a story set around the Sydney Harbour Bridge during several eras.

The new novel was begun before that one was finished, so it was written during her first years of being a mum to her four-year-old son, Huxley. Even her boy's name has literary connections.

"He's named after Aldous Huxley and Thomas Huxley the English biologist, who was known as 'Darwin's bulldog'."

Put the scientific connection down to the fact that Hay's husband, Nigel Beebe, is a molecular biologist.

Hay and the men in her life live at Fairfield, in Brisbane's inner south, after moving here from Sydney in 2008. Her husband is from Brisbane and she says she has enjoyed getting to know the city. So much so that her next novel, which she is writing now, is set here.