

Paul McGeough

He looms on the screen at the front of the classroom, bleary-eyed and scruffy. His hair is dishevelled and since I saw him last, he has grown a sizeable beard – greyish and wild. He is wearing a grey T-shirt which he has obviously slept in, and it seems we woke him up.

But I was expecting that.

We watch him scramble to turn on a light – it is sepia yellow and makes the entire screen shot seem old and outdated. I quickly scan the room in the background – bare and small; messy, with quite a bit of equipment within view.

“Hello. Hello,” he says. “Am I on screen?”

Yes, Paul. Hi. We can see you. There are about 30 of us here.

“God. Okay. Just let me take a sip of ... I just need to wake up a bit.” I watch, intrigued, as he swigs from a can of Coke.

It is 4am. Paul McGeough is in Kabul, Afghanistan, on assignment.

And we have definitely woken him up.



After spending many hours interviewing eight times Walkley award-winning journalist Paul McGeough, I asked if he was willing to come into one of my classes at UTS, to talk to my students. He was more than willing, happy to do so, and we made a date.

I made sure the creative nonfiction undergraduate class was prepared – they had to read as much of his long-form nonfiction

as they could before he came in. They did, no complaints; they read avidly and were excited.

And two days before the scheduled guest lecture, McGeough rang me.

“I am so sorry, mate – I won’t be able to come to your class. I’m on my way back to Kabul. Really short notice.”

He seems a little out of breath and quite wired. He always seems to be on the run. Of course I am disappointed, more for my students who were so looking forward to meeting this man who writes prolifically from every corner of the Middle East and beyond. The line is crackly – I’m not sure if he is still in Australia or ringing from a satellite phone, already in Afghanistan.

“But listen,” he says. “I don’t want to let you down. How about you Skype in? We can do the session via Skype.”

But Paul, it will be in the wee small hours of the morning in Afghanistan!

“It’s fine,” he says. “I never sleep in Kabul anyway.”

So, true to his word, there he is, in a dingy hotel in the heart of Kabul, doing what he does best: reporting. But clearly untrue, he has been asleep. It is a mere detail, as he gradually wakes up in front of us.

His beard is an attempt to blend into the background in this war-ravaged city – a man without a beard would be a strange sight on these streets. And that is where he spends much of his time – on the streets, amongst the ordinary people of Afghanistan. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has been torn apart by coalition incursions against Taliban strongholds. But the Taliban is not routed; indeed, it is 2009 and it has surged again to form a shadow government in opposition to the then President, Hamid Karzai.

My students ply McGeough – who has by this stage woken properly – with questions: about Afghanistan; about his writing; about his fears; about his life. With the clear hit of his early morning can of Coke, McGeough answers every question, warming up as they keep coming.

Doris Pilkington Garimara

There are two things I am certain about before interviewing Doris Pilkington Garimara in her home in Western Australia: I have to get to the now defunct Moore River Native Settlement, and see it with my own eyes before I meet her; and at least one of my daughters has to accompany me on this journey, both to Moore River and to the interview. For this story – and this storyteller – is ultimately about mothers and daughters.

We fly into Perth in the middle of a mild winter's day, leaving enough hours for the nearly three-hour drive to Mogumber, 130 kilometres north-east of the capital. We are a travelling party of three – Hans Bool, The Dutchman with his camera, my youngest daughter Tessa and me. Our final destination is Exmouth, some 1200 kilometres north of Perth, at the end of the North West Cape.

The road leading from the West Australian capital quickly begins to wind through wine country, driving through vineyards on either side. It is lush and the weather warm for winter, as we amble along the Great Northern Highway, a black ribbon of bitumen cutting through the countryside.

The lushness of the vineyards soon morphs into sparseness and rich red soil, lining the highway right to its edges. There are beautiful eucalypts dotted around – ghost gums and mallees – and the feel could not be more different from our home state of New South Wales. It's the red soil, really – seems like it has blown in from the nation's desert centre. What I learn is that the colour

comes from the rich iron ore deposits throughout this vast state. But the difference is also an awareness that the Indian Ocean is pounding and surging on my left as we drive north – that this is a western ocean, not an eastern one, to which we eastern seaboarders are accustomed.

Mogumber is where we are heading first, in search of Moore River Native Settlement, which was established in 1918. More than 30 years later in 1951, Moore River Settlement was taken over from the WA government by the Methodist Overseas Mission, which then founded the tiny township of Mogumber.

When we arrive there, it is already wintry dark. And now cold; as soon as the sun dips, the iciness begins to creep. There is one solitary light on in this tiny township perching at the head of the Moore River. It is the Mogumber Tavern and we enter, hopefully. There is a man and his dog, a fellow drinker, and the publican. The man tells us proudly that his dog Blue plays soccer and the publican lets us know there is no accommodation in town. At all. Not even a camp site. But he adds, “Park anywhere, love. We don’t mind.”

A collective ‘we’, the town of Mogumber.

So we do. We find the town’s oval and drive onto its surrounding grounds, parking our campervan near a big, ancient gum. We sleep in the outback silence, awakening the next morning to frost everywhere, outside and in our vehicle. It is freezing as we wait for the sun to climb and thaw this place.

Leaving Mogumber behind, we drive the eleven kilometres in search of Moore River Native Settlement. The soil seems sandier here and more orange than deep red. There is mallee scrub everywhere and banksias in abundance. And suddenly, there it is: a thin, vague, innocuous sign post, so easy to miss in this vastness:

MOORE RIVER NATIVE SETTLEMENT. TURN RIGHT.

We drive in, fifty metres from the road, and my heart is in my mouth.

Kate Holden

There is a gentle fragility surrounding author Kate Holden. Or perhaps a canny wariness. It is not directed outward but rather inwards, towards herself. At herself.

Throughout her memoir, *In My Skin*, she regularly and seemingly affectionately writes of the scar marks left inside her elbows from needle puncture wounds. But when I ask to see them, she is thrown.

Perhaps it is a rude request. She is shocked, and says, “No one has ever asked me that question. To see them.”

Her hands shake slightly and she crumbles a little, a sort of delicate caving in, all the while showing me the scars. And there they are, a testament to five years of heroin addiction.

Perhaps I should not have asked.

I want to reach out and touch them. One is a definite hole in the cradle of her elbow. I imagine the numbers of times she has stuck a needle in those veins and injected the drug. The effect it had on her immediately – the life effect it had on her and in many ways, is still having on her. On her family.

Perhaps here also I must confess to an inner knowledge of this parallel universe of drug addiction, for from the age of twelve I grew up with a heroin addict in my own family home. On so many levels, *In My Skin* resonated and reflected many personal moments. I also confess this to Holden when we first speak on the phone.

So I am not sorry I ask to have a look. In a way, her

well-constructed media bravado melts away. The scars seem to herald a more honest space between us – almost a closeness. Here is a successful young woman, a gifted and highly talented writer. Here also are the physical ravages of earlier life choices and a desperate addiction. The epitome of a horror drug story parents hold their breath about as they try to help navigate their children through their teens and into adulthood – an average Australian family, blown apart when a child, albeit a 21-year-old-child, experiments and becomes addicted to a dangerous and illegal drug.

And then in order to support her habit, turns to prostitution.

And then writes a raw, harsh and poetic memoir, with candour and skill.



It is a beautiful autumn day when The Dutchman and I set out from the suburb where we are staying with friends in Beaumaris, south east of Melbourne. Back onto Beach Road, Port Phillip Bay shimmers in the sun on my left, driving north. The bay is dotted with small sails; huge tankers on the horizon. People are cycling and running and walking their dogs along the promenade. There is an air of reprieve – winter is coming and Melburnians know that then the bay will gloom over and the days become frosty and blustery, north winds blowing in from Bass Strait.

Greg Malouf & Lucy Rushbrooke

Lucy Rushbrooke says she dreams about a certain cheese pie, so I am eager to taste it. It's actually one of the first things she says to me, as we meet in a café in a northern suburb of Melbourne.

"I dreamt about eating this pie last night," she says, for emphasis.

I soon discover cheese pie is a slight misnomer. An Anglicised and overly simplified euphemism for a taste sensation almost incomprehensible. I now understand the dreams.

Her cheese pie is really made of shredded haloumi and shredded butter, gently cooked but not entirely melted between a sort of Lebanese bread-like pastry. It liquefies in the mouth and lingers in the mind. As we order she warns me, "Greg really should not eat these."

We sit and savour. Her former husband, Greg Malouf, reaches for one of our cheese pies.

I pipe up, You can't eat that!

"Why?" he says, deliberately taking it and placing a piece in his mouth.

Ah, perhaps the triple bypass and heart transplant? I squeak at him, in horror, as he swallows.

While he continues to eat, his eyes flash waywardly. He says quietly and calmly, "Two heart transplants, actually."

Another incomprehensible moment.

There is cholesterol-based heart disease in chef Greg Malouf's family, a genetic condition called hypercholesterolaemia where

the body produces too much cholesterol. At twenty, while working in Paris as an apprentice chef, he underwent an emergency triple bypass surgery. Eight years later in 1989, he had a heart transplant. All this I know from my research but nowhere had I read about his second heart transplant.

“That was in 2003 or four, I can’t remember. When was it?” he asks Rushbrooke, now co-author and close friend, as he chews.

“Yes, something like that,” she says nonchalantly, as only those who have faced life and death in their lives or lives of those they love, and survived medical interventions as dramatic and momentous as any sort of transplant, can.

“It’s the genes, the Lebanese genes,” she laughs off. “I am just going to grab a knife so we can cut these ...” Rushbrooke is still intent on satiating her cheese pie dream and I really do not mind for the time being.



The A1 Bakery, established in the early '90s, is on Sydney Road in the suburb of Brunswick, exactly four kilometres north of the Victorian capital. This is where we meet on this gloomy Melbourne Saturday afternoon. It is a big place, with simple tables and chairs on the left as you enter; but walk past the big glass counter and keep going to the back, and there is an array of produce and products; scents and aromas at once as exotic and tantalising as they are varied. Arabic music is playing and people are talking, loudly, all around us. This is a Middle Eastern hybrid of a café and delicatessen and grocery store, cushioned comfortably in the middle of dozens of other multicultural businesses: internet cafés, boarded up shops, graffiti, a church, second-hand clothes shops, posters, and busy, busy traffic, constantly. Its main menu is Lebanese, producing pies and pizzas for which people travel miles to savour, dream about, and keep coming back for.