

# Di Yerbury: A Literary Journey

by Kristin Prescott

Since 1925 the Society of Women Writers NSW has been able to boast a membership list that includes the names of some of Australia's most inspirational and successful women writers and journalists. They have fought gender battles at times where the plight of women writers was far from equal - and they've won! One such woman is the Society's Patron, Professor Di Yerbury.

'I was very honoured to be asked to be the Patron of the historic SWW. Several years previously, the Society had invited me to be a guest speaker. I finished that talk by reading a very short story I had written, and was warmed by the encouragement I was given to keep writing,' she said. 'Being a writer can be a tough and lonely labour, as we all know. We all hit "blocks" at times; and it helps to be able to share such experiences, and to receive the support and encouragement of others who understand because they've been through it too. The celebration of each other's achievements is an important feature of the Society, which I thoroughly enjoy.'

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Professor Yerbury's writing journey started as a young girl growing up in Devon in the UK.

'At 16 I won a national competition with a short script for a play. There was an interview about it at the time in the *North Devon Journal Herald* in which, when asked what career I planned to pursue, I said I was going to be a novelist.'

Her career path may have varied from her childhood dream, but by the time Professor Yerbury became Patron of the Society in 2005 she was well established as a female pioneer. Her CV is seven pages long and boasts numerous firsts for women dating back to the 1970s. These include being the first female Assistant Secretary in the Australian Public Service, the first female Professor of Management in Australia and the country's first female University Vice-Chancellor. She sat at the helm of Macquarie University



*The loungeroom of Di Yerbury's Barnstaple apartment.*

for nearly twenty years, building it into one of the ten most international universities in the world.

'As a Vice-Chancellor, it made me determined to do my best to ensure that other disadvantaged groups had the chance of a great education, especially Indigenous people from rural and isolated backgrounds. I'm aware how fortunate I've been, despite my family's socio-economic disadvantage, and I have a strong sense of needing to give something back.'

As Patron she says she wanted to do something more to support the Society and came up with the idea of an over-55 Residency. It is a very personal dedication.

'I bought my little flat in Barnstaple in an over-55s complex, just a couple of minutes' walk from the town centre, when my mother's health deteriorated in 2009. She died last year. By then, I had totally fallen in love with Barnstaple all over again. However, without my mother there, I'll probably travel to Barnstaple only twice a year from now on.'

Professor Yerbury felt it would be a waste to have it empty for much of the year.

'I'm very aware how valuable it can be for a writer to have a change of skies, and some dedicated time away from everyday life to focus on research and writing. Moreover, the fact that it is in an over-55s complex provides an opportunity for that often-neglected age group to be recognised and supported by a dedicated award. I hope the writer who uses it as a base will be inspired by the beautiful coastline and lovely countryside of North Devon, and by this delightful little town, to produce some of her best writing.'

Despite some incredible detours Di Yerbury has never given up on her writing dream either.

'I hope that, when I'm less busy, I'll spend more time there, and one of my fond hopes is to do some writing there myself.'

*For details on how to apply for the Di Yerbury Society of Women Writers' Residency please go to page 6*