

# Passion for the written word at the Newcastle Writers Festival

➔ WORDS: Michelle Meehan

Very few authors enter into a life of writing realistically expecting their endeavours to end in fame and fortune. They simply do it for the love of it.

The same could be said for Newcastle journalist **Rosemarie Milsom** who, over four years ago, decided to channel her passion for books and her experiences at writer's festivals into a plan to establish her own fully-fledged literary event right here in the Hunter.

It was a challenging task full of long nights and early mornings, juggling the demands of the festival organisation with the responsibilities of a full-time job and a young family.

There were few personal financial rewards for all her time and effort – budgets are tight for a festival of this sort - but of course, that's not what Rosemarie was seeking anyway.

She, like the authors she was booking to speak at the event, was simply driven by her passion for the written word.

"It's about engaging with books... It's just that buzz you get from a really well-written book and I've never lost that, I've had that all my life and that never tires because there's always new and exciting books and brilliant new writers who are emerging.

"Also, I suppose as a journalist I really value good writing, it's what drove me as a journalist and it still drives me actually... good writers are really precious."

After talking the idea through with various people and finding it had support in the community, the first Newcastle Writer's Festival leapt off the page and into venues across the city in 2013.

Far from being a second-rate regional affair compared to its big city counterparts, Rosemarie secured a solid line-up of highly acclaimed writers including award-winning Australian author Robert Drewe, media commentator Jane Caro, journalist David Marr and much-loved British actor and new Australian citizen, Miriam Margolyes, who delivered the keynote address.

**"Yes it is smaller (than the other festivals), but I don't think it's smaller in ambition; it might be smaller in scale but I think the calibre of writers we get and the nature of the program is very ambitious."**

"Word got around after the first festival and it was nothing but positive. I owe a big debt to those writers who came along and participated in the first festival because we were unproven and they trusted that I knew what I was going and supported the very first one.

"To build the festival I've had to call in so many favours and people have been really generous. From publishers helping



*Pictured Rosemarie Milsom*



Media panel discussion with Christina Koutsoukos, Erik Jensen, Chris Uhlmann + Paul Scott.  
Photo Credit: Chris Patterson at *InterVision*

me get their talent to the festival, from volunteers, from local organisations funding us – I just feel really privileged, to be honest, it is a privilege and I love it," Rosemarie said.

Since the inaugural year, the festival has gone from strength to strength and in 2016, it will feature 140 writers participating in almost 70 sessions across five main venues over three days from **April 1–3, 2016**.

It will dive straight into some of its brightest and best on the first day of the event, with Olympic gold medallist Leisel Jones sharing the highs and lows of life in the fast lane with former Newcastle sports journalist Brett Keeble over lunch at the Crowne Plaza.

This will be followed up by Rosemarie's pick as one of the real highlights of the program, the opening night event - Tim Flannery's *Excellent Adventures*. From the discovery of a new tree kangaroo species in New Guinea to dinosaur fossils in Victoria, the well-known scientist, explorer, environmentalist and former Australian of the Year has forged a unique path throughout his career.

"He's been an explorer, a scientist, a palaeontologist, he's discovered dinosaur bones, he has trekked through the jungles of New Guinea and uncovered new tree kangaroo species... I think he's just interesting as a person and he's a fantastic speaker."

Other highlights of the diverse three-day program will include respected indigenous journalist Stan Grant, who is passionate about creating unity between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australians, the best-selling author of *Baby Love*, Robin Barker, looking at families, feminism and her foray into fiction

and veteran journalist Kerry O'Brien, who will talk about his biography of former prime minister Paul Keating.

This year's festival will also include an expanded line-up of panel discussions, looking at everything from coal and climate change to domestic violence and the future of regional Australia, as well discussions on how the terrorist attacks in Paris have shaped our view of the French capital.

Given Rosemarie's long background in journalism, it is little wonder the festival has such a strong link with current affairs.

"I suppose being a journalist I'm always aware of sessions that respond to what's going on in the world at the time... I'm always looking at issues that are happening," she said.

"Writer's festivals have moved very much into the discussion of issues area, I've noticed that a lot over the last five years and those sessions tend to be very successful. People want to go and listen to writers talk about their books of course, particularly if it's a very successful or well-known book, but they also want to see writers talking about other issues.

"I think audiences are really just hungry for ideas and debate. There's something about having it live and having it in front of you, it's not edited, it's not condensed into a mainstream media format, it has that immediacy and also that dynamic between people on a panel that you get when you see it live."

The festival also includes a diverse and exciting program coordinated by the Newcastle Regional Library aimed at primary school-aged children. Rosemarie said it was important that they also catered for the next generation of readers and writers.

"Some of the children we have get really excited about meeting their favourite writer, you can just see it and it's like a spark," she said.

"We all want to encourage literacy, it's crucial that as a community that we support literacy and that starts at school and ultimately I don't think we could ever have a main festival without helping children."

Head to [www.newcastlewritersfestival.org.au](http://www.newcastlewritersfestival.org.au) for the complete program. There is a mixture of ticketed sessions and free events, with almost half of the program open to the public at no cost. Ticketed sessions are on sale via [www.ticketek.com](http://www.ticketek.com) or 4929 1977 unless otherwise stated.

**WIN**

We have 2 x double passes for the opening night on April 1st to give away! Visit the GIVEAWAYS page at [www.intouchmagazine.com.au](http://www.intouchmagazine.com.au) for details.