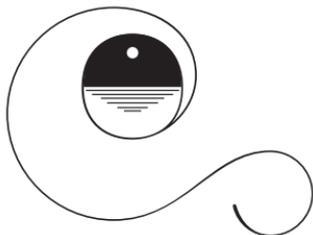


ROBERT DREWE



Swimming  
to the  
moon



FREMANTLE PRESS

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Drewe was born in Melbourne but grew up on the West Australian coast. He began his writing career as a young reporter on *The West Australian*. Since then, his novels, short stories and non-fiction have been widely translated, won national and international prizes and been adapted for film, television, radio and the theatre.

## CONTENTS

The Gainsborough Flyscreen	9
The Oslo Lunch	13
Country Dining	17
Show and Tell	21
Taylah and Tia Maria	25
Sitting Backwards on Chairs	29
Prickles	33
Sparrows	37
Spitting	41
Romance	45
Windy Harbour	49
Getting on the Map	53
Tourist Tips	57
Idiots	62
Best Beaches	66
Just Deserts	70
The Beer Spoon	74
Nan's Cookbook	78

Learning to Read	83
Bad Presents	88
Snodgrass	92
Dropping In	97
Trannies	101
Budgies	105
Tarzan and Noeleen	109
Dampier Discipline	113
The Doughnuts of Rottnest	117
Friday Boronia	126
A Night at the Seacrest	130
The Snake Pit	135
Corduroy Man	139
Lunch	143
Quizzing Santa	147
The Lone Avenger	151
Snugglepot and the Hobyahs	155
Obituary for a Brown Dog	159
Sharp and Onions	163
Statues	167
Daphne Walking Past	171
The Lions of Claremont	175
Combustion	179

Butchers' Shops	183
St Anne Versus Ikea	187
Herb	191
Irene	195
Contacts	199
Mrs Kerfoops Goes to Bali	203
Trouser Singular	207
Tins of Air	211
The Gyms of Life	215
Swimming to the Moon	219



## THE GAINSBOROUGH FLYSCREEN

In my next life I want to be the person who's paid well to think up the colourful names for items in home-ware catalogues. I used to discard these imaginative inserts in my newspapers and magazines, never appreciating the cultural knowledge behind them. Not any more.

Involved in a comprehensive household makeover, I perused my first hardware catalogue the other day. And I was swept away. It was the Gainsborough Flyscreen that did it. How different, how muted and opaque the famous painter's landscapes would have turned out if his favoured scenes had been viewed through fly-mesh. Other possibilities immediately sprang to mind: the Wordsworth Leaf Blower, the Patrick White Orbital Sander, the Toulouse-Lautrec Multi-Purpose Ladder.

A local furniture catalogue was my next study. It

was obviously compiled by someone of a 1950s show-business bent. The centrepiece was The Belafonte Collection, comprising the Belafonte Sofa Bed, the Belafonte Corner Suite, the Belafonte Sofa Pair, the Belafonte Lounge Suite and the Belafonte Sofa with Chaise. ‘This sleek design incorporates style and comfort at a great price,’ it said. Made of bonded leather, it was pictured in, yes, chocolate and black.

Seeking something a little plumper perhaps? The Gleason Lounge Suite gave ‘deep contoured cushions to support you comfortably’. Suits honeymooners. For the elderly, the Crosby Recliner and the Wayne Powerlift Recliner no doubt brought nostalgia as well as relief.

Though a little sad for his fans to see the Dylan Recliner-and-Ottoman in the same cultural and age range as Bing and the Duke, the Jagger Sofa and Clapton Chaise both offered an edgy versatility. And for those inclined, the Shelley Recliner provided a place for lyrical contemplation – perhaps even thoughts of the poet himself, whose own final unfortunate reclining, on the beach at Spezia, was as a drowned corpse on a funeral pyre.

If you’re flogging furniture, however, you can’t go past American states or towns. Like celebrities’ children,

all modern chairs and tables seem to be named Montana, Dakota, Florida, Idaho, Arizona, Colorado, Texas, Denver, Mississippi, Alabama, Dallas, Indiana, Aspen, Oregon, Hollywood, Brooklyn, Savannah or Newport.

Local names just don't have the same furnishing clout. I could find only a handful of them, although Jindabyne, Yarra, Bunbury, Dural and Bendigo appealed in an Australian sort of way. It's easy to imagine a Perth suburban mother's complaint: 'Who spilled their Milo on the Bunbury?'

Those catalogues are as nothing, however, compared to the annual publication of Ikea, the global furniture company. Ikea published 197 million catalogues last year, in twenty languages and sixty-one editions. It was Ikea's dyslexic founder, Ingvar Kamprad, who came up with the idea of giving furniture names instead of product codes.

For example, chairs and desks have men's names, while fabrics and curtains have women's names; garden furniture is all Swedish islands; children's items are animals and birds; bed linen is flowers and precious stones. A line of children's toys is named Duktig, meaning well-behaved, and Billy, a Swedish masculine name, is a popular bookcase. A range of office furniture is named Effektiv.

Even a catalogue as famous as Ikea's ran into strife recently for deleting images of women from the Saudi Arabian version. One picture showed a family apparently getting ready for bed, with a young boy brushing his teeth in the bathroom. His pyjama-clad mother, whose face and one wrist are exposed, was excised from the Saudi version.

Another picture of five women dining was also removed from the Saudi edition. Ikea later apologised to the rest of the world for producing a catalogue 'in conflict with the Ikea Group values'.

Though Ikea would probably never name a furniture range after a drowned and cremated poet, or a flyscreen after a landscape artist, some of the Swedish products have actually faced a little difficulty with their names in the catalogue's English editions.

I'm thinking of their 'Jerka' desk, their 'Fukta' plant spray and their 'Fartfull' workbench. Mind you, as long as I've got their trusty allen key (and the usual qualified carpenter on call, when I fail to assemble the flat-pack Ikea bed or desk or bookcase after twelve or thirteen hours intense effort), as far as I'm concerned the company can do no wrong.

## THE OSLO LUNCH

Having a beer on a hot day with an elderly visitor from Adelaide reminded me that once you could tell which part of Australia someone came from by their names for beer glasses. My friend had just asked for a 'butcher'. A what? The barman was mystified.

It turned out to be a 200-millilitre, or seven-ounce, glass.

To the confusion of interstate travellers, a middy in Sydney and Perth used to be called a handle in Darwin, a half-pint in Canberra, a pot in Brisbane and Melbourne, a schooner in Adelaide, and a ten (ounce) in Hobart.

Before metrication, depending on where you were drinking, you could buy beer in glasses of four, five, six, seven, ten, fifteen and twenty imperial fluid ounces, with varying names in each state. These were replaced by glasses of 115, 140, 170, 200, 285, 425 and 570 millilitres.

As Australians travelled more widely, the range and differences decreased. Now most pubs no longer have glasses smaller than 200 ml, or seven fluid ounces (either a pony, horse, butcher, seven, or ‘small glass’).

People aren’t drinking from small glasses these days. Or loyally drinking their state-only beers. Try asking at the Cottesloe Hotel for a pony or a butcher (or a Swan or an Emu) and see the looks you get. More popular now are 200 ml, 285 ml and 425 ml glasses, and increasingly most pubs now serve pints (570 ml, 20 fl oz). A request for a ‘Pot of Gold’ in Queensland gets you a 285 ml glass of XXXX Gold.

With state-by-state beer and beer-glass differences erased (and West Australians being weaned off ‘peanut paste’ for ‘peanut butter’ as in the rest of Australia), the best way now to tell someone’s origins is to ask them what they call swimwear and processed sausage.

In WA, and most other areas, we swim in ‘bathers’, though ‘togs’ are recognised. In NSW, swimsuits are known as ‘swimmers’ or ‘cossies’ (short for ‘costumes’) and in Queensland they’re ‘togs’. Queensland has a couple of other idiosyncracies. What’s simply a ‘bag’, a ‘case’ or a ‘schoolbag’ in most parts of Australia, and the world, is called a ‘port’ by Queenslanders.

So what is it about a pinkish, bland-tasting, plastic-wrapped tube of processed pork sausage that it attracts so many terms across Australia? Broadly, the west coast's 'polony' is 'Devon' on the east coast. In Victoria and Tasmania, where they must put away a lot of processed sausage, it has three or four names. And then it gets even more complicated.

Thanks to *Australian Meat News* I now know that WA's simple polony is 'Belgium sausage' in Tasmania (a beef variant is known as 'beef Belgium'); 'Byron sausage' in New England; 'Devon' in Victoria and NSW (except the Hunter Valley and New England), Tasmania and Canberra; 'Empire sausage' in the Hunter Valley; 'fritz' in South Australia and Broken Hill; 'German sausage' or 'pork German' in Victoria and northern Tasmania; 'veal German' or 'luncheon meat' in Queensland; 'round meat' in the Northern Territory; 'Strasburg' or 'Strasbourg' or 'Stras' in Victoria and Tasmania (the name is used for a spicier processed meat in other areas); 'wheel meat' in Tasmania; and 'Windsor sausage' in North Queensland.

Whew! In childhood the local Watsonia smallgoods company provided my Perth school lunches with many a polony-lettuce-and-tomato-sauce sandwich. Then one morning my mother announced dramatically that

henceforth I would instead be consuming something called the Oslo Lunch.

This was intriguing, a lunch that the kids ate in Oslo, Norway, apparently. Or maybe not. In Oslo, perhaps they were sick of it and hankered after an Adelaide Lunch, or even the Perth Lunch most popular at my school (excluding pies): a half poppyseed roll filled with tinned spaghetti or baked beans.

The Oslo Lunch, invented by a Norwegian Professor named Schiotz, had been associated with improved child health and weight gain in Norway and Britain. When it was introduced in Victorian schools, children who ate this cheese and salad sandwich on wholemeal bread, accompanied by milk and fruit, were shown to be healthier after six months. So Western Australia followed suit.

Brown bread, lettuce and Kraft cheese, an apple, and sun-warmed Government milk that made you gag. We had this stuff already. It was hard to see what was the big deal. Even polony was tastier.

## COUNTRY DINING

Dining in the country is not what it used to be. We used to always stay at the old Mount Barker pub on the way to Albany in the family Ford. Eating there was a classic country culinary experience: curly pats of butter, longneck beer bottles on the table, slabs of white bread, and ‘cold collations’ of the day-before’s roast lamb.

My father liked to order rabbit. He was fortunate in his choice: there was always rabbit on the menu. He also liked to ask the ginger-headed waitress: ‘The rabbit – is it with or without myxomatosis?’ She’d shrug, bemused. ‘Dunno, it’s all in the gravy.’

They had duck on the menu too, and you had to carefully remove the shotgun pellets from your mouth.

Nowadays travellers stay in motels rather than the ubiquitous Commercial, Railway or Freemasons. But now even the smallest rural village has a cool, shaved-headed

and stubbled ex-city chef, running a rustic/bohemian restaurant serving local produce of an organic nature.

The other night we went for a celebratory dinner at one of our town's smartest new restaurants. Without wishing to step into Rob Broadfield's territory, I can say that the beef carpaccio and white asparagus-pea-and-pinenut risotto were simple and delicious, the wine excellent, and the staff attentive and friendly.

After the main course, the waiter topped up our glasses, smiled warmly and said, 'May I recommend the cheese of the evening?'

We demurred. We were full. 'I'm a cheese specialist,' he confided. 'I know my cheeses, and this one is a beauty. We have lots of it, too: no one else wanted cheese tonight.'

Only one cheese? 'Oh, yes. We concentrate on having only one special cheese per night. And tonight's is a triple-cream brie.'

We preferred hard cheeses. 'Look, I can't recommend this brie enough,' he insisted. 'I'll bring you a glass of wine, on the house, to go with it.'

Well, OK. And the cheese and wine came, and we polished it off.

'How was it?' asked our smiling waiter.

It was fine, thank you.

‘That’s good. It’s from Gippsland, Victoria.’ He named the town and the brand. ‘You heard that three people died recently after eating it?’

What!

‘But the situation is all under control, they reckon. Yep, listeria,’ he murmured thoughtfully. His smile was even broader. ‘Apart from the deaths, another twenty-three got sick from it, and there was one miscarriage.’

What! Soon we were frantically googling the cheese on our mobiles. Sure enough, three deaths had occurred last year from a triple-cream-brie listeria outbreak on the NSW south coast and these particular cheeses were recalled across the nation.

All the online community-health sites said that listeriosis was caused by eating food contaminated with bacteria known as *Listeria monocytogenes*. For some people the illness required hospitalisation and it could be a threat to life.

The symptoms included fever, headache, tiredness, aches and pains, which then progressed to more serious forms of the illness, such as meningitis and septicaemia. Less serious complications were diarrhoea, nausea and abdominal cramps. Symptoms could appear any time from three days to seventy days. Listeria was relatively

uncommon, but there was a fatality rate as high as thirty per cent among at-risk people.

The celebratory dinner had taken a turn for the worse. We were experiencing at least four of the symptoms already.

In our trembling hands, our mobiles explained that outbreaks of listeria were usually caused by unpasteurised milk, coleslaw, hot dogs and pâté, and especially soft cheeses.

Those worst affected were the already ill, the elderly, babies, people with immune deficiencies, pregnant women, diabetics, and people with liver and kidney disease. Pregnant women affected by even a mild form of the illness could experience stillbirth or premature birth.

However, anyone could get it. We beckoned the waiter over, but at first we were too flabbergasted to say anything. Eventually I said, ‘So, three people died from this cheese you recommended? The exact cheese?’

He was still smiling broadly. ‘Oh yes, but they weren’t anyone important,’ he said.

## SHOW AND TELL

It's agricultural-show season in the boondocks and how nice it is to disregard Facebook and iPhone and be among competing chutneys, rival tea-cosies and opposing pumpkins again. That there are still women who treasure the Fowler's Vacola bottling outfit, who knit little woolen hats for boiled eggs and decorative jackets for their coathangers and toilet rolls, shows that the comforting verities of yesteryear still prevail.

I just have to see a felt draught-stopper in the shape of a giraffe, say, or a cauliflower-and-parsnip model of the Sydney Opera House, and I'm swept by nostalgia for childhood. Actually, my mother wouldn't have been caught dead making those things (a wobbly pottery ashtray for her Turf cigarettes was her limit), but their symbolism is so strong that I forget that my childhood

eggs went unhatted and that our toilet rolls remained starkly minimalist – and I somehow recall them.

I imagine one of these women (Gwen? Audrey? Thelma?), sitting up late into the night sewing and knitting as the vat of fig and melon jam cools on the wood stove. ‘Coming to bed, darl?’ yawns her patient husband, frowning at the clock on the mantelpiece. ‘It’s going on for eight thirty. Bugger this daylight saving.’

‘Soon, Mervyn,’ she says. ‘I just have another fourteen egg beanies in Eagles colours to knit.’

It’s easy to mock these craft endeavours, but you try conjuring up enough white vegetables to make an opera house. And not many animals’ physiques lend themselves to a draught-stopper.

However, no one is not deadly serious about country women’s home-cooked food. As I was last weekend, munching delicious date scones, jam and cream as I settled down for an afternoon of horse-and-rider fancy dress, children’s pet parade (‘All exhibits must be breathing – no pet rocks or rubber ducks’) and quail, canary, duck and bantam comparisons.

But even agricultural shows have moved with the times. You mightn’t be surprised to learn that at my nearest show there are Showboys as well as Showgirls,

and ride-on lawnmower races. And there's an event called the Stockman Ironman competition. A relay contest, this is definitely the crowd-pleaser, with the biggest (\$1000) prize money.

Each three-person team is 'handicapped' by the inclusion of a woman and a team member aged over forty. (Some things don't change too fast in the country.) Each team must chop a chunk of hardwood into kindling, light a (paperless) fire with it, boil a billy, dig a post hole, sink a post, and ride an obstacle course on horseback through the fire.

The team members then have to drink a can of warm beer and eat a cold meat pie. Then it's back on the horse – bareback – to carry a bale of hay underarm around the arena. (Until protests at last year's show, only the women had to undergo the queasy beer-and-pie part of the event.) For the final leg, the teams drink more cans of warm beer, race back to the fence post, and chop it down.

There used to be a children's version too, except the Ironkids, between galloping around bareback, had to eat a cold spinach roll and drink a warm Coke. Presumably a flamboyant spew was hoped for by the interesting country-male case studies on the show

committee. Sensibly, both women and children jacked up at this discrimination and vomiting on horseback is now democratically adult-only and across the genders.

It was the equestrian costume parade that attracted me to the show, to see my daughter and her pony trotting around as angels. Alas, they were unplaced, the Wizard of Oz team picking up first prize. But it was another two competitors who made the papers. Of course it was tempting fate, but the girl inside an elaborate Humpty Dumpty costume was thrown by her horse (dressed as the Wall), which then rolled on her and cracked her eggshell. And her foot.

Before all the king's horses and all the king's men could react, Superman tore across the arena, cape flying in the wind, and put Humpty together again. Luckily, this Superman's alter ego was the local hospital's mild-mannered emergency-department doctor, Martin Chase.

You couldn't make this stuff up. It's different in the country.