

## IN LOVE AND WAR: NURSING HEROES

LIZ BYRSKI

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### ABOUT THE BOOK

In the aftermath of the Battle of Britain, nurses in the burns ward of the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead, Sussex, began caring for aircrew with horrific and disfiguring facial burns. The ward was under the direction of pioneering plastic surgeon Archibald McIndoe, who established revolutionary new surgical and therapeutic treatments. His patients banded together to form the Guinea Pig Club. Their experiences, and McIndoe's trailblazing work, created a company of heroes.

The surgeon encouraged friendships and relationships between patients and nursing staff, and nurses played a vital role in the treatment and rehabilitation of these men, but it was a contribution made at significant personal and professional cost.

For Liz Byrski, born in 1944 and growing up in East Grinstead, the faces of the Guinea Pigs were literally the stuff of her childhood nightmares. Indeed, the nightmares continued until in her late sixties, when Liz returned to the town to make peace with her memories, and to hear from the nurses whose stories have never been told.

This thought-provoking memoir considers issues of truth, fact, fiction and the nature of memory, of how we respond to facial disfigurement, and the challenge of weaving a personal narrative of childhood fears and their impact into a story of wartime and immediate post-war history.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Liz Byrski is a senior lecturer in writing in the School of Media Culture and Creative Arts at Curtin University. She is the author of eight bestselling novels including *Gang of Four* and *Family Secrets*, and twelve non-fiction books including the memoir *Remember Me*. She is a former journalist and ABC broadcaster and was an advisor to a minister in the Western Australian Government.

### INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

*You have written both fiction and non-fiction books. What was it about this subject matter that made you choose the memoir form rather than, say, a novel?*

I actually set out to do research for a novel about the Guinea Pigs. I knew that one day I would write about it and then I saw an episode of the BBC TV series *Foyle's War*, which was based on the story of McIndoe and his patients. While it was in many ways representative of The East Grinstead story, *Foyle's War* is focussed on crime on the home front, and so the historical setting was background and that made me think in terms of the potential of fiction to investigate the emotional and psychological trauma for the patients and nurses at East Grinstead. In the process of talking to the men themselves, and then discovering some nurses, whose stories had never previously been told, I felt I wanted to write it as non-fiction. I also had a compelling need to work out why it was all so significant in terms of my own story and that the only way I could sort out what it was all about for me, was to write it as a memoir – a journey back in time.

*Your fascination / fear with the Guinea Pigs began when you were a child. Did your nightmares about them wax and wane across time? Why was it important to you to seek them out again?*

It became increasingly important with age and with my growing interest in English social history between the 30s and the 60s. I came to feel that my sense of being haunted by the Guinea Pigs' faces had prevented me from appreciating that I had been a hairsbreadth from a fascinating corner of wartime history, so I wanted to know more, to try to understand what it was like for the people involved in this extraordinary medical/social experiment.

*Did you realise the extent to which the story you were researching would be such a personal one?*

I always knew it was personal but I hadn't been able to work out why. When I went back to England to do the research I realised that there were many themes in the story that made it personal for me, and that my questions, while initially about the Guinea Pigs and the nurses, were also just as much around ideas about memory and memorialisation, and about the England of the period, as they were about the Guinea Pigs.

*What was the most difficult aspect for you of researching this story? Did you encounter unexpected moral conundrums when interviewing your subjects, and again later when writing about them?*

The most concerning issues for me were those of representation. How could I write about things, which today would be deemed unacceptable, without being judgemental from a 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist perspective? As a 70s feminist, how could I handle the expectations and treatment of women without detracting from the extraordinary courage and dignity of the Guinea Pigs? How could I peel back the memorialisation of heroes to expose memory and what other aspects of the story it might reveal? I was completely taken aback by the conflicting emotions that it raised for me in terms of what was unacceptable in the 40s and 50s of my childhood, and the questions I needed to ask to uncover the stories decades later.

*Have you written the book you thought you were going to write? What has surprised you in this journey?*

Yes and no! I never end up writing the book I plan to write because it always changes in the writing, and in this case it took me literally years longer than I anticipated because I was still trying to work out what it was all about for me. The big thing was getting to grips with the impact of war on someone who has no conscious memory of it. That, and what I learned about my own family, was not only surprising but also extremely significant for me, and it has become even more significant since I finished the book.

*Would you have written this book if you knew how much it was going to ask of you?*

Yes, I think I would. I have always worked things out by writing about them, so I think I always knew that at some time I was going to write about the Guinea Pigs. What I didn't know was what that represented or what it would reveal, I just knew that it was something I needed to do because there was something I had to learn from it, and I could no longer resist that imperative. I still think there are layers that I haven't uncovered and that now, having written it, I would like to write the Ward III story as fiction.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think the act of writing this book (including all the researching, interviewing, compiling, reflecting) has assisted the author in shifting the way she felt – and feels – about the Guinea Pigs?
2. What were the greatest difficulties or obstacles the returned airmen had to face following their injury?
3. Why do you think faces and the cues they give us are so important to humans as social beings?
4. What can we learn from this book about judging a person by how they look? Is it possible to avoid this?
5. Do you think that McIndoe placed his nurses in a compromising situation in asking them to ‘do their bit for the war’? Did they have a choice in obeying him?
6. What do you think the personal toll on the nurses may have been in this work environment?
7. What kind of person (patient and nurse) would be best equipped to deal with the QVH environment? Which would be the most vulnerable?
8. What do you think of McIndoe’s approach to rehabilitation?
9. Was McIndoe’s hospital a product of its time? Could such a social experiment be conducted nowadays?
10. What support do we have now for those returning injured from war? What support do we have for those nursing them?
11. Why is it so difficult for Liz Byrski to begin to write this book? What is it about the F. Scott Fitzgerald quote (p. 202) that gives her clarity she needs to begin to write: *He wanted to care, and he could not care. For he had gone away and he could never go back anymore. The gates were closed, the sun was down, and there was no beauty left but the gray beauty of steel that withstands all time. Even the grief he could have borne was left behind in the country of youth, of illusion, of the richness of life, where his winter dreams had flourished.*
12. What role does Liz’s friend Evelyn play in this story? What is her importance to the narrator?
13. How is it possible to feel strongly and instantly connected to a stranger, as the author is with Dennis Neale (chapter 11)?
14. In what ways do people rely on each other for an innate sense of well-being? In what ways does this book demonstrate the importance of community?
15. Is this a story that could have been written earlier, say at a time that was much closer to the post-war period? How much time do you think needs to elapse before we can reflect on big events and begin to understand what they mean?
16. How can this story from the Second World War assist our understanding of the world in which we live today?

