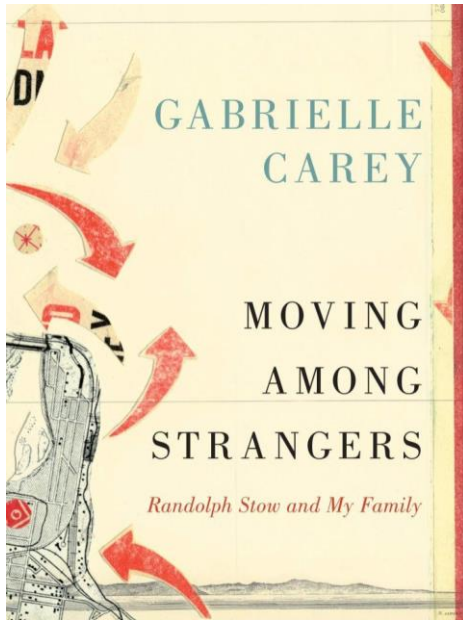


## WRITING INTO THE PAST



In her most recent work, *Moving Among Strangers* (2013) Gabrielle Carey shares a very personal exploration of one of Australia's most lauded writers and poets, Randolph Stow. She finds herself fascinated with this literary figure, whose family was connected with her own for generations, and who knew her mother from childhood. As the book chronicles Stow's part in her family's past, secrets come to light, and Carey comes to discover unknown depths to her parents' history.

As well as celebrating the impressive work of Randolph Stow, Carey's very personal story also explores issues many writers find themselves entangled in. Here she shares her thoughts with Tara McLennan on how she grappled with the essential questions: Who owns the story, particularly the family story? And who is the trusted narrator of such closely held secrets?

- Alyssa Critchley

**What do you believe to be the most important things creative non-fiction has to offer readers and writers alike?**

A fresh view of reality and a reminder that all stories, even fictional ones, have their roots in reality. Good creative non-fiction also helps us recognise the really wondrous stories that are always all around us. James Joyce once said that, 'Whenever I'm searching for something, I look down and find it.' Often the best stories are straight in front of us – so obvious that we don't see them.

**How do you view the relationship between grief and personal storytelling?**

I believe grief is at that heart of almost all stories – fictional and non-fiction – from *Harry Potter* to *Anna Karenina*. It is an aspect of life that is as large and meaningful as love and death; in fact it's the primary emotion that links love and death – and yet we have very few traditions or rituals to help us to live through it. Sometimes I suspect that our epidemic of depression is really masking massive unreleased grief.

**What were the greatest challenges and revelations in imaginatively exploring the lives and experiences of family who have passed away?**

The challenge was to be as true to the dead person as possible; by that I mean to reveal them in a way that honoured them but didn't reveal too much that might be hurtful or embarrassing – at the same time writing with the awareness that a writer can never really know the interior reality of another person, dead or alive. One can only imagine. Fortunately, based on the correspondence I've had from people since the book was published – people who knew Randolph Stow in particular – it seems that my imagination, informed by research, has served quite well to portray a man who was notoriously shy and private.

**How has your relationship with memories of your parents been affected by writing out their stories?**

Writing about my parents, researching their lives and learning more about them, has helped me maintain a sense of family and also shifted my perspective – made it broader and more sympathetic. It has made me believe that one can continue a relationship with someone, even when they're dead. (If that makes sense.)

**In exploring the stories of author Randolph Stow, did you discover new ways of interpreting the writer's life?**

Yes. However, I did feel that, given his private nature, much of my interpretation was a kind of guesswork based on research, interviews and a close reading of his novels and poetry. I wouldn't pretend to fully 'understand' Randolph Stow. I think he might have been mystery to himself; perhaps we are all partly mysteries to ourselves.

**Stow often wrote poetically on the nature and importance of silence. How do you perceive the writer's connection to silence, as well as the need to give voice to the past?**

I have developed a greater respect for silence, especially in our increasingly noisy world where so much static (twitter, email, Facebook etc) is mistaken for communication. What is not said is as important as what is said; that goes for writing as well. The decisions about what you leave out of a manuscript are possibly the most important ones. *Moving Among Strangers* is one of the shortest books I've written. I've learnt a lot more about the importance of suggestion and implication and about leaving gaps for the reader to fill in with his/her own imagination. This is an essential part of the conversation between reader and writer.

I'm not sure how possible it is to give voice to the past; perhaps it's only possible to imagine the past and offer that imagined version alongside many other versions. I am sure the forthcoming biography of Stow by Suzanne Faulkner will give a very different version of Stow's life but that doesn't make either version more or less valuable.

As I was writing MAS I thought often about what Stow would think about my interpretation of him. I also thought how vulnerable a dead person is to post-mortem analysis and I was hopeful, in the end, that if he could read it, he wouldn't feel altogether misunderstood.

**Gabrielle Carey is the author of eight novels, including *The Waiting Room*, *In My Father's House*, and *Puberty Blues*. Her work ranges from biography, autobiography and essays, to articles and short stories.**