

I Was a High School Drop Out

Libby Sommer



Dr Karl Kruszelnicki with Libby Sommer at the launch of *My Life With Sammy*

My mother said typing and shorthand would get me a long way. It was 1964, so she enrolled me in Secretarial College. I had dropped out of High School at fifteen impatient to start living, to earn money and leave home.

I'd always wanted to be a writer, but it seemed an impossibility for someone like me. *You could write a gossip column in the local paper*, my mother said. *You couldn't be a journalist*, my father said. *You'd have to be able to write about anything*. He pointed to a straw in a glass on the table in front of us. *You'd have to be able to write about that straw*. I could do that, I thought to myself.

As things turned out, still a teenager, I got married. Then came three babies in four years. The only writing I did was in my journal and a daily dream diary. When our youngest child began kindly I started looking for a job. A friend told me it was possible to get part-time work at the ABC. I'd always been a rusted-on ABC fan, and Gore Hill was close to where we lived at Lane Cove. It took 14 months of perseverance, of going back and back and back to the Personnel Department to finally get a placement. It was an entry level position in the exciting world of film and television production. I was hired as a casual, replacing "on-staff" part-time typists when they went on holidays. So my mother was right about the typing after all.

My first assignment was to work in the *Four Corners* office typing up transcripts of interviews. When I saw Caroline Jones pouring herself a cup of tea at the morning tea trolley, her face so familiar from seeing her on television, I thought she was an old friend for a moment.

Three months later I was promoted to Full Time Typist. Transcribing sound tapes was a horrible job, and to make matters worse, I was good at it. Fast and accurate. But I learned something: there were employment opportunities at the ABC at that time. And so, after twelve months, I was promoted again, this time to Producer's Assistant. Producer's Assistants were also Director's Assistants, a fancy name for dog's body. Your job was to co-ordinate all aspects of a television program. *An engine room person*, is how my father described it. I worked on Children's programs, Features, Dramas and Documentaries. But I was extremely happy to be there. This was not a bad job for a High School Drop Out.

I loved being part of it all at the ABC although, in those days, it did seem that half the staff was drunk. I travelled with film crews all over Australia and was privileged to meet some extraordinary people. I worked there for eleven years.

I realised I was probably never going to be promoted to Producer or Director. Mind you, if I ever had been, I have no reason to believe I would have been any good at it. So I became

Principle of my own PR company, specialising in health, sport and leisure. I was passionate about healthy lifestyle. I registered a Pty Ltd company name, had business cards printed and set up a home office. I had spent half my life wanting to be a writer and now I was having a go at it. I got my first client, the Bicycle Institute of New South Wales a positive story on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in my first week.

But then, in 1993, Australia was in recession and I lost my retainer clients. Not wanting to lose face and close the business, I tipped my adult children out of the nest, joined Youth Hostels, threw on a backpack and headed off to Europe for two years of adventuring. There could be a book in this, I thought to myself.

It wasn't until I was in my forties, a single mum with three grownup children, that I finally put pen to paper to write a book. The journey became *Life Without A Perm*. But after four years I couldn't get the manuscript to a publishable standard, so I enrolled in an MA in Professional Writing at UTS. In 2001 the synopsis, *Around the World in Fifty Steps* was my first published story in *Overland*. By then, I had completed three degrees. I went on to dedicate myself to short stories because that was what I did best. After all, Alice Munro stayed with the short form and, in 2013, won the Nobel Prize for literature.

Thirty more short story publications followed over the next fifteen years. Three book-length novel-in-stories completed. Two Emerging Writers Grants awarded from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. But no book publication.

Then, in 2015, after twenty years of trying to get a book accepted, *My Year With Sammy* was accepted by Ginninderra Press, a small but prestigious Australian publisher. The manuscript had been shortlisted in the UK's 2014 Mslexia Competition, and Seizure's 2015 Viva La Novella Competition.

In January 2016 *My Year With Sammy* was named "Pick of the Week" in *Spectrum Books*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Canberra Times* and *The Melbourne Age* and syndicated nationally by Fairfax newspapers.

The moral of this story is, all it takes to become the only thing worth being, a writer, is perseverance, dedication and hard work.

I have just begun to blog at <https://libbysommer.wordpress.com/>

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My Year With Sammy is available from Harry Hartog at Westfield, Bondi Junction: <http://harryhartog.com.au/new-book/my-year-with-sammy/9781760410643/buy-online> and from Ginninderra Press: <http://www.ginninderrapress.com.au/fiction.html> or enquire at your local book shop.