

Dr SHIRLEY WALKER

MAPPING MEMOIRS

WITHIN THE

AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE

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Recently, I had the great privilege to visit Australian author Shirley Walker in her home in the hinterland of Ballina “between the escarpment and the sea”. I had spent the weekend at the Byron Writers Festival, which takes place on the first weekend in August each year. Despite storms and rain, the Festival was superb – the volunteers coped with the wet and muddy conditions. The day of my return, Shirley had invited me for coffee and a chat on her sun soaked balcony.

I read Shirley Walker’s second book, “The Ghost at the Wedding” earlier this year and was inspired to contact her and ask her to be a speaker at ADFAS Pokolbin. The story is set in the Clarence River region of northern NSW, and is the narrative of one family, three generations and two World Wars, all told through the eyes of a woman left to wait at home. That woman is Jessie, Shirley’s mother in law.

This is a tale that is reproduced throughout regional and remote Australia, a moving portrayal of the impact of war on the generation of women whose brothers and husbands, then later sons, went to fight overseas, all in the space of a few decades. It evoked memories of my own grandfather William who left West Wyalong in 1914 to fight in Egypt and France – where he was gassed and returned a broken and emphysematous old man. His two brothers Harold and John died near Ypres not long before the end of the First World War. I have visited their plaques at the War Memorial in Canberra. My grandmother was less than pleased when her son and my father John Alexander put his age up to enlist for World War II, and served in a tank corps in Papua New Guinea and Borneo.

“The Ghost at the Wedding” shared the Asher Award for the best book by a woman with an anti-war message. It also won the Nita B Kibble Literary Award for 2010.

Shirley will turn ninety years old next year, but her mind and interest in writing and literature remain sharp and intact. She is a former senior lecturer in English at the University of New England in Armidale, where she taught Australian literature. Shirley kindly gave me a signed copy of her first book, “The Roundabout at Bangalow: An Intimate Chronicle” - her memoir of growing up in the northern rivers region. The front cover is a photo of Shirley and her about to

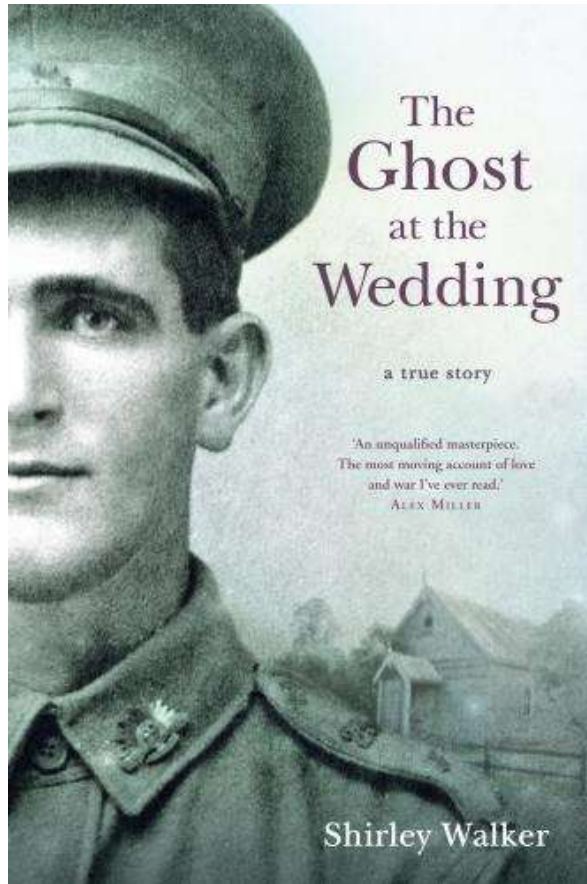
be husband Jim taken in Martin Place – I have a similar photo of my parents taken as they walked through Sydney after World War II. She tells me the case Jim is carrying carries the fabric for her wedding dress. There would be a comparable photo in many homes in Australia from that era.

Shirley Walker is now an Honorary Fellow at the University of New England. She is a past President of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature and is the Founding Director of the Centre for Australian Language and Literature Studies at UNE. She has published critical articles on Australian Literature, including the work of Mary Gilmore, Judith Wright and Dorothy Hewitt.



Shirley Walker in her home in the hinterland of Ballina “between the escarpment and the sea”

I drive back to Ballina after our morning coffee. At the Airport waiting lounge, I speak to two women from Sydney who also attended the Byron Writers Festival. When I show them the signed book and tell them of the lovely visit I had with Shirley Walker, one of the women comments that at the opening dinner for the Festival, Annabel Crabb mentioned that she was reading a “book that everyone should read” - she recommended none other than “The Ghost at the Wedding”.



In this book Shirley looks for the true story of the family into which she married, and the grief of Australian families who lost men in two world wars.



In this book, Shirley narrates the complicated and sometimes blurred resonances of her “half-a-lifetime” memoir. She exemplifies her concern with the unreliability of memory and the way it can exaggerate grievances or distort past perceptions. A memoir about crossroads which interconnect through memory.