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## Messy History

Peg Fraser

**Corresponding author:** Peg Fraser: [pegfraser1@gmail.com](mailto:pegfraser1@gmail.com)

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I've been invited to contribute to this, the last issue of *Cultural Studies Review*, because I recently published a book about the Black Saturday bushfires.<sup>1</sup> As a curator with the Victorian Bushfires Collection at Museums Victoria, I was one of three historians who collected objects, documents, photographs, oral histories and ephemera to document the fires of 7 February 2009 that killed 173 people, destroyed over 2000 homes, killed thousands of domestic animals and livestock, as well as countless wild animals, and burnt nearly half a million hectares of bushland.<sup>2</sup>

Strathewen, a tiny settlement on the far fringe of Melbourne, was hard-hit on Black Saturday. 10% of its residents lost their lives and 80% of its homes were destroyed. Through a series of in-depth oral history conversations with survivors, former residents, bereaved relatives and emergency workers, all of them with a connection with Strathewen, I tried to understand the impact of a catastrophic event on people's lives.

There are many different stories in the bushfire interviews, from people who evacuated well before the fire, those who fled at the last minute, those who stayed on their properties through the worst of it, people who tried to enter Strathewen to rescue family members and those who were central to the relief and recovery efforts. And the nature of those narratives depended not only on individual experiences of the day but also a heap of other influences: sometimes fear or anger or sorrow, sometimes hope or optimism, often self-reflection, desire or determination. I was particularly interested in how the narrators I worked with navigated between the past and the future and how the interpretations they gave to the events of the past—either Black Saturday and its aftermath or the times before—provided a path for the future.

After an event like Black Saturday, people often struggle with feelings of helplessness. This is particularly true in developed nations, where we like to think that we are sheltered from such harsh realities as disasters and unexpected deaths. There were a lot of ways in which people in Strathewen worked to re-assert that feeling of being in charge of their own lives. Some made art—poetry, photography, painting, knitting—others started right away to clear and rebuild, or to replace lost infrastructure like fences or mailboxes. And almost everyone I interviewed

tried to make sense of what happened by creating a personal narrative, one that attempted to reconcile the past and give them direction and support for the future.

People often used the effort to explain to me what had happened to try to make sense of it to themselves. Sometimes they attempted to correct what they saw as inaccuracies or injustices in the public record, or to justify actions they had taken, or to try to influence future decisions. Many of the stories I was told also evolved with subsequent retellings, with narrators leaving some things out, adding other things in, or changing interpretations of the same event. With more distance from the event, some details became more important, others less so. Stories were often re-fashioned to support decisions or attitudes that had developed in the intervening time.

So the stories of Black Saturday, even from a group of people who had experienced the same event in the same small place, were never straightforward. They were complex and tangled and fluid and enormously varied and sometimes contradictory, sometimes even self-contradictory. I suppose this could be viewed as a problem for a historian, but I thought that the way in which people framed their stories, the details they included or did not include, how stories changed or were rigidly word-perfect, revealed important insights into the experience of surviving and coming to terms with a catastrophic bushfire.

It is not easy, especially when working with a distressed, vulnerable and divided community, to write about such an event. I tried to represent the narratives without judgement and with respect for the narrators' right to own their stories and change their interpretations, but also my own right as a historian to question and interpret. So much depended on my own relationship with the narrators that I wrote myself into the story as a character. I looked at the stories through different thematic lenses such as gender, memorialisation and cultural scripts, searching for similarities and differences beyond the facts of the day. I didn't offer any major conclusions about Black Saturday, but instead ended with observations, questions and concerns for the future.

When people ask me what the book is like, I struggle to describe it, usually saying that it is not a conventional book; it is messy history. (As a matter of fact, a respected historian from Monash University told me that he didn't think it *was* history. It was, he said, a mash-up of history, sociology, cultural studies, psychology, maybe some anthropology—but it wasn't history. Fortunately for me he also said, 'I don't know what it is, but keep doing it.')

It was in looking through the back issues of this journal that I found words that described what I had been doing.

I realised that I had written an example of Klaus Neumann's 'experimental history'. Experimental histories, he wrote, 'allow for multiple perspectives, draw on competing and incompatible epistemologies, employ narrative structures contrary to established generic convention, reflect on the act of writing about the past, and/or include fictional elements in their writing of historical non-fiction'.<sup>3</sup> I did not include fictional elements, although I am very sure that some of my narrators did, but the rest rings true.

This is particularly so for the first chapter of the book, which describes the fire and its immediate aftermath. Within a rough chronological framework I juxtaposed short quotes from the narrators—sometimes just a few words—describing from many different perspectives what people experienced on that day. Other writers about Black Saturday, notably Peter Stanley, Chloe Hooper, Adrian Hyland and Karen Kissane, have managed to corral similar stories, organise them into a coherent structure and present them in gripping narrative.<sup>4</sup> As necessary as these books are and as much as I admire them, I didn't want to do that.

To force a phenomenon such as Black Saturday into a narrative format is to give the illusion of order and control. In the attempt to make an event comprehensible, we add chronology, linearity and distance through a third-person narrative structure. But the fires of Black Saturday were beyond our comprehension; Kevin Tolhurst, a fire behaviour specialist who was a major witness for the 2009 Royal Commission into the fires, estimated that on that day the fires released an amount of energy equivalent to 1500 of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima.<sup>5</sup> I wanted readers of that first chapter to be bombarded by a confusion of impressions and feelings and sensations in the same way that survivors were bombarded by noise, smoke, flames and fear. I wanted them to feel, in some small way, the chaos and terror.

Ten years ago Neumann might have been justified in calling this style of writing experimental history, but today it seems to be a natural, even logical, fit with the increasingly complicated work of studying contemporary events. That is why I call it messy history, as it has many loose ends, involves emotions as well as ideas, lives with tensions and contradictions, and blurs the distinction between actors and observers. Doing this kind of work can be frustrating, exhilarating, even exhausting, but it is extraordinarily satisfying.

*Peg Fraser is an oral historian and curator who helped establish the Victorian Bushfires Collection at Museums Victoria. Her book *Black Saturday: Not the end of the story* (Monash Publishing, 2018) recently won the Oral History Award at the Victorian Community History Awards.*

## Endnotes

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3. Klaus Neumann, 'But is it History?' *Cultural Studies Review*, vol 14, no 1, 2008, 19-32.
4. Chloe Hooper, *The Arsonist: A mind on fire*, Penguin Random House, Melbourne, 2018; Adrian Hyland, *Kinglake - 350*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2011; Karen Kissane, *Worst of Days: Inside the Black Saturday Firestorm*, Hachette, Sydney, 2010; Peter Stanley, *Black Saturday at Steels Creek*, Scribe Publications, Brunswick VIC, 2013.
5. Kevin Tolhurst, "Report on the Physical Nature of the Victorian Fires Occurring 7th February 2009", University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2009, 14.