

CELEBRATING COUNTRY LIFE IN THE VALLEY & RANGES

YARRA

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A writer's inspiration in Eltham



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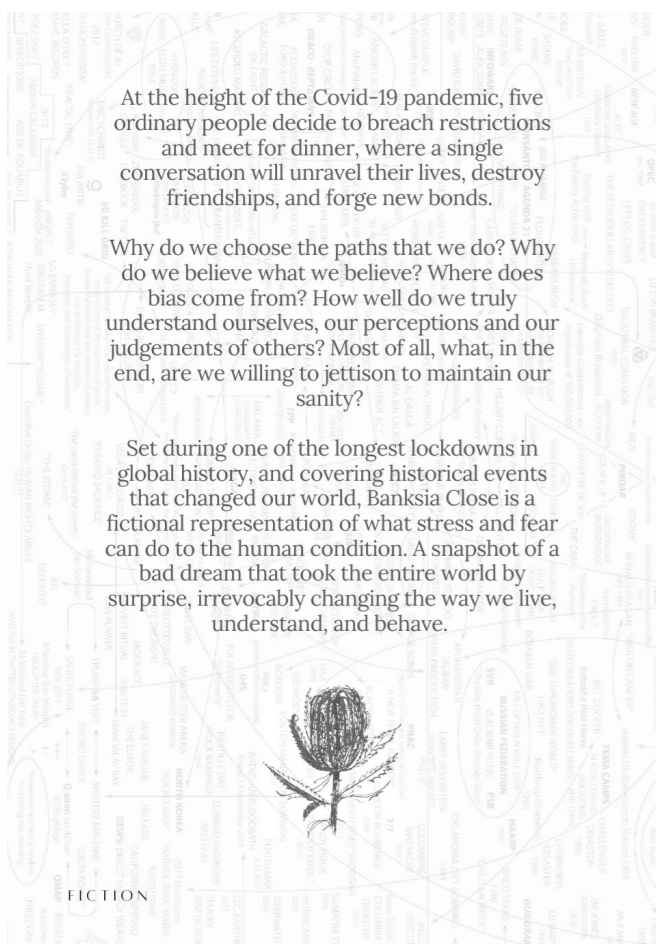
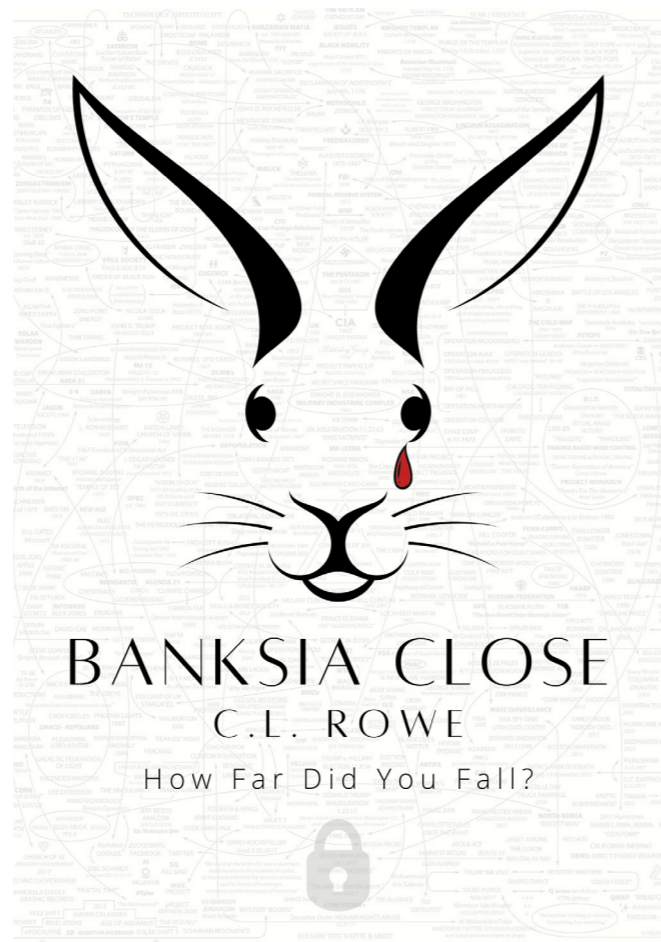
AUTHOR AND ACADEMIC

CASSELISE ROWE

Cass Rowe is an author and academic living in the Dandenong Ranges. She has recently published her first novel, *Banksia Close*, which will be officially launched in March this year. Here, Cass shares her thoughts about the process:

What sparked your love of writing?

I have always been drawn to words and vocabulary, but being drawn to something isn't enough. You need inspiration, and for a writer, you need to decide who your influences are going to be. I used to write plays as a kid, but never knew how to refine the ramblings into something coherent. I gave up for a time, and then read *The Pact* by Jodi Picoult when I was sixteen. That was probably the moment that the childish spark re-ignited into something more mature. I love that book. It isn't one of her better-known ones, but it was the first time I really appreciated how awesome it is to get sucked into a narrative, and I became determined to write with similar intent. I did an English Literature degree to learn both the science of books, and the indefinable quality of good writing, and it remains hard to define. For me, it's as simple as writing books that I'd enjoy reading. It seems as good a guideline as any. I recently connected with Jodi Picoult, and she has been very generous in her encouragement. It's a beautiful thing, to be upheld by an author you admire. I'm sending her a final copy of the book post launch. My childish dreams have come full circle. Can't ask for more than that.



When did you discover you were good at your craft?

That's an interesting question. I don't think writers are ever convinced that they are good at it, until someone unbiased tells you so. Friends and family don't count. They will tell you anything. It's an unforgiving craft. You need to have a certain amount of honest inner criticism as an artist of any kind, but writers, in my opinion, get away with less than many of their creative fellows. Good writing entails rules that can't be compromised. You can't disguise mistakes as rustic quirks, and you can forget about experimentation. For me, I had many comments over time, but nothing spoke quite as strongly as having a very respected and avid reader advise me to submit Banksia Close for the Miles Franklin Award. I unfortunately missed the cut off for submission, but it was the first time that I honestly believed in myself. It probably came a little late, but that's my fault. Self-appreciation is elusive and seems to come with time. I'm forty this year and needed that kind of feedback to really believe I was good enough. Writers are so self-deprecating. Suffice to say, you always have more to learn, and writing is a broad craft. I'm always looking to further refine my skills, and challenge my comfort zones.

What inspired this novel?

Being a Melbournian during Covid indicated many conflicts. As someone who is a big believer in free agency and democracy, but holds little time for conspiracy and fear, I found myself a little alone. People seemed to sit exist in extremes, and I couldn't find a foothold for myself that I was comfortable with. I was also extremely uncomfortable with how the QAnon conspiracy theory seemed to be so prevalent in the paranoid, often, without any direct awareness. Social media has a lot to answer for, and it is, for so many, the only source of news. I find this scary, whilst others believe it to be normal. Having conversations became explosive as a result. It completely destroyed the social fabric, and the populous seemed immune to the fallout at the time. Cabin Fever does that. Makes you crazy. Banksia Close was therapy really. A way for me to grapple with the extremes without allowing implosion on my closest relationships. I've had to learn

the hard way that the fight is often not worth the wounds. Being a writer numbs the sting, as you can disappear into your own little universe.

Tell me a little about the plot...

The novel takes place during the harshest stage four lockdown. Five neighbours, who all have their own biases and secrets, decide to breach restrictions and meet for dinner. Since they have been so confined, and frustrated, the circumstances become a breeding ground for conflict. By the time the dinner is over, everyone is in tatters. The remainder of the novel covers the recovery from the decay, and individual paths for peace after the conflict.

How did you approach the process?

It was an argument. My partner and I had a fight. He's very practical and works in a medical environment. He has a very localised perspective, whereas I am more global, and tend to look at things philosophically. It drives him nuts, since I am like this with everything I do. We couldn't find a mutual agreement point, which was problematic when we had to exist together with the kids in a confined environment that we were not accustomed to. I also needed to step outside my own sphere and attempt to understand multiple perspectives. This entailed a lot of research, both interpersonal and academic. When it came to understanding conspiracy thinking, I had to go to more uncomfortable levels. I even got on the dark web and became involved in conspiracy movements to gain a perspective, some of which were profoundly affronting. It was unnerving to say the least. I find writing to be a bit like method acting. If you want to write deeply complex characters, you need to live in their shoes, even if the shoes hurt. It's worth it in the end, but it's not always easy. *I'm also a 'pantser', and not a plotter. As a result, the stories are less efficient to write, but I believe it's worth it. If the writer doesn't see the twists coming, then the reader won't either.

**If you're not familiar with the term pantser, it's a writer who writes without a plan or an outline; the term derived from the expression, 'to fly by the seat of one's pants'.*



Excerpt from *Banksia Close*

*Virus don't just infect the body. They infect your mind,
your faith, your sanity, your loyalty.*

How long did it take to write?

The book took about seven months, in between parenting and work responsibilities. It took much longer practically. Writing the story is only half the battle.

How have people responded to *Banksia Close*?

People have been unanimous in praising the writing, but less generous on where they feel they exist within the narrative itself. It's not an easy read, and it wasn't supposed to be. It was deliberately written to challenge and expose. Some people have said that the dinner party dialogue was so tense that they needed breaks to get through it, but they still went back to see how it ended. As far as compliments go, I'll take it. I'm a realist. I don't write to escape life. I write to dissect it. Readers need to be up for that.

What's have you got in store for us next?

I'm somewhat torn on what to release next. I'd already finished another novel when I started *Banksia Close*, and several characters do cross hatch between the two stories. Since then, I have begun constructing several stories which cover several evident characters, and I need time to cohesively weave the stories together. I put a great deal of time and investment into character construction, and they all have a unique story to tell, but I'm not interested in writing a series that requires chronological reading. Rather, it will be encapsulated narratives that will link together if readers choose to notice. At the moment, I'm doing my psych post graduate study, which leaves less time for writing fiction, but I fit it in where I can. It's an addiction I can't quit, and the fallout will come. It just takes time. I have four boys under 8, and they are all mini psychos who seem intent to disrupt my calm. It's like *Lord of the Flies* at my house, but the stories will keep coming. ■

*The Banksia Close paperback launch will be at
Belgrave Library 16 March 2024 at 10.30am.*

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