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AUSTRALIAN IDOLS IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

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By Kirsty Murray

Millions of people currently know the story of Casey Donovan, the 2004 winner of *Australian Idol*. Thousands of kids across Australia stayed up way past their bed time to watch Casey take the prize. Fleeting, her story was a hot topic in the schoolyard. But eventually Casey's story will drift into the annals of history, possibly as a minor footnote in a study of popular culture in the early 21st Century. Who remembers the Australian Idols of an earlier generation? Her status as an 'Australian Idol hinges' on a moment in time.

In fifty years time, the average Australian child will be no more interested in reading Casey Donovan's story than they are in reading about Zena Dare, a teenage stage sensation circa 1905. Zena was an Australian idol in the early 20th Century. You could buy picture postcards of her lovely face at every newsstand. She was a star in both England and Australia by the time she was sixteen. She had an incredible life though I doubt her biography was ever a popular read. It's been long out of print and despite her fascinating life, it's a boring slab of text. It suffers the same fate as thousands of biographies and histories. For all the dazzling pieces of information, there's no real story you can sink your teeth into. Real life is confusing, frequently messy, and full of petty distractions. The story invariably gets lost in the great big chaotic mess of reality.

Everyone loves a good story but the problem with getting kids to engage with history is it often lacks the power of a narrative. How can children make sense of all those dates and events, those characterless ghosts that don't seem to bear any connection to them and their own lives? This is where historical fiction comes into its own. By merging the intimacies of ordinary people's lives and uncovering the narrative thread through the life of a fictitious character, history becomes accessible. Only historical fiction can truly bring history to life.

The eminent American historian, Barbara Tuchman sites Lucy Fitch Perkins, an author of historical fiction for children, as her first initiation into the wonders of the past. Lucy Fitch Perkins (1865-1937) wrote a series of children's books known as "The Twins Books". As this title suggests, each of the 26 books in the series featured a set of twins from various eras in history. Interestingly, the series has been republished this year for the first time in nearly 50 years. There's a growing understanding around the world about the importance of historical fiction. Perhaps, in the information age, it is more important than ever to rediscover traditional ways of shaping the overwhelming mass of information available to us.

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I loved the Twins Books as a child myself and any other work of English and American fiction. There was very little Australian historical fiction around in my growing up. Even when my own children were young, I found it hard to find them any fiction that engagingly explored the history of Australia. It was this dearth of Australian historical fiction that led me to begin writing it myself.

In writing the *Children of the Wind* series I set out to encompass 150 years of Australian history. Historians invariably overlook the role of the child in history. Their stories are invisible but modern Australia was hugely influenced by the lives of its child immigrants. Four years ago I began formulating the idea for a saga that would allow me to detail different generations of child migration, that would explore stories from early settlement and follow that link across time to the present. I settled on the Irish as the culture that would help me build the series. It has to be from the Irish that we get our contrary sense of history – our ability to celebrate the criminal underdog (Ned Kelly), thwarted rebellions (Eureka) and lost battles (Gallipoli).

Bridie's Fire, the first book in the series, is based on the experiences of over four thousand orphaned girls taken from workhouses across Ireland and shipped to Australia between 1848 and 1850. In the course of their lives, these girls bore witness to pivotal events in the development of Australia from the gold rush through to federation. Creating the story of how Bridie O'Connor gave me the opportunity to bring this generation of girls to life. Not wanting to let go of Bridie O'Connor's story, I wove it into the second book in the series, set fifty years later.

Becoming Billy Dare is set in the 1890s, an era when Australia was beginning to define itself as a nation with a separate identity to the old world. While researching the theatre history of Australia I began to develop a new understanding of the impact of popular entertainments in history. Entertainment is so deeply embedded in our ordinary lives, its easy to forget the role it plays in reflecting and shaping history. Through the eyes of an Irish orphan runaway, I was able to reconstruct a time in Australian history when new voices were emerging that would define a new century.

The third book in the series *A Prayer for Blue Delaney* is set between 1953 and 1956 and the final title in the series, *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong* is a contemporary story that draws all the threads of the stories that preceded into the era of Casey Donovan and the kids of today. History isn't boring nor is it static and historical fiction may be one of the best ways of understanding our own role in the never ending story of time.