



WESTERN PORT WRITES

Literary Festival 10 & 11 October



NEWS 2026



Western Port Writes Literary Festival 2026

Following our inaugural festival in 2024, the Western Port Writes Literary Festival is returning in October 2026.

Save the date and block out your weekend from **10 to 11 October 2026** for two days of story telling, sharing ideas and listening to wonderful writers from the Peninsula and beyond.

This year, we have moved the festival weekend to October, taking advantage of longer days and warming weather. And in exciting news, we have found our 2026 festival home at Coolart Wetlands and Homestead. We think it's the perfect place for a weekend of words. So come along to hear your favourite authors in the Observatory; stroll the glorious gardens and enjoy outdoor entertainment; gather the children in the Visitor Centre for storytelling; and step into the historic Homestead to purchase books at Petersen's pop-up bookstore, then have them signed.

Our talented, passionate volunteer team has been hard at work curating the festival program, exploring festival themes, inviting authors and presenters, and bedding down the myriad arrangements that go to stage a bookish festival.

We're aiming for that ideal blend of fiction and nonfiction, some nature and garden inspiration, some deep and meaningful conversations with big thinkers, a little politics (it is state election year!), a dash of crime, and a splash of wonderful literary stories. And did we mention a fabulous Opening Night event on Friday 9 October? We look forward to sharing more details with you on socials, our Enews, and on the website.

In 2026, the Schools Program will have Peninsula children's authors visiting participating primary schools in the Western Port region for workshops on story telling. We are also inviting children to tell their stories of Western Port, which could be selected to be in our magazine or website.

When we launched Western Port Writes we felt there was space for a festival that celebrates and shares the many stories we hold here, and showcases the talented writers – established and emerging – who live in or have connections with our part of the world.

In 2026 will be drawing authors from our region and beyond, to share their creativity, make us think, make us feel, and help us to learn more about our world.

Stay tuned

We'll be sharing names of participating writers and artists in the coming weeks, and the Festival Program will launch in August. Watch our website, Instagram and Facebook for updates. For news, events and early ticket release, subscribe to the Enews: westernportwrites.com.au/subscribe

Come and join us in October!

The Committee
Western Port Writes Literary Festival

In this issue...

Catch up on festival planning; meet some of the writers coming to the festival; get to know local Peninsula crime and food writer Victoria Brownlee, in a profile by journalist (and new committee member) Belinda Hawkins; and learn about a new project to spotlight the wonders of Western Port Bay. Happy reading.

Calling Volunteers

Volunteers are at the heart of the festival action! We welcome new volunteers – join us over the festival weekend and in the lead-up. There are many exciting ways to be involved: ushering and ticket checking; book sales and signing; greeting and wayfinding; artist liaison and transport; venue staging (bump in and out). It's a great way to get behind the scenes at the festival.

We need your help to make this festival flow. It's going to be fun, and we'd love you to be part of it.

REGISTER NOW: westernportwrites.com.au/volunteer
Or email us for more info at:
volunteer@westernportwrites.com.au

WPW Committee

Belinda Hawkins	Marg Tilleard
Bronwen Gibbs	Marnee Wills
Chantelle Doulis	Olivia Randall
Claire Gustavsson	Ro Dowling
Julie McInnes	Tilly Fay
Karina Smith	Sally Holdsworth

Supporting WPW

We're a dedicated volunteer-led team who believe in the power of words and stories. But we couldn't bring the festival to life without the Western Port and Mornington Peninsula community partners and local businesses that support the arts in our region.

Their generosity is critical to our success. It helps us to stage a festival that's vibrant and lively – with a wonderful diversity of writers; is accessible and affordable for a wide audience; and fosters the creative arts.

We thank our major festival partners, Mornington Peninsula Shire Council and the Community Bank Balnarring & District – Bendigo Bank, who provided essential core funding. *Somers Paper Nautilus* is a foundation festival partner.

And we are grateful for the backing and encouragement we get from so many business and community

friends. Their support helps us to fulfil our broader vision for the festival – our hope that it will have wide appeal, offer something across age groups and interests, and elevate the joy of reading.

Would your organisation like to support the festival?

Local businesses and organisations can get involved in many ways. We'd love to have you on board. Please contact our sponsorship team to discuss how: sponsor@westernportwrites.com.au

Donations

With financial year end nearly here, why not consider a donation to WPW. We welcome contributions from keen book lovers who, like us, believe that words and stories are important. We've partnered with the **Australian Cultural Fund** to receive donations and provide tax receipts. No donation is too small, and it's a way that you can be part of Western Port Writes 2026.

It's easy to donate. Head to our website and link via the **Donate** button: westernportwrites.com.au

Artist Profile

Tilly Fay

You might have enjoyed the delightful illustrations in our socials and on the cover of this magazine. They're the work of local artist Tilly Fay, who shared her creative story with us.



I've always enjoyed anything creative; I love observing the world and collecting life through art. I spent my childhood drawing with chalk on the pavement,

hands in the dirt and sand, then later in the margins of my schoolbooks.

Perhaps my art is whimsical? I love blending nature with imagination and using mixed media, threaded between words. At school there was less room for creating instinctively, and it has been lovely reconnecting to creativity through the lens of possibility!

I also enjoy sharing poetry in the open-mic scene in Naarm. Spoken word is an immediate connection with people, it feels like a breath while larger projects are forming. I'm currently working on a novel, a children's book, and poetry anthology, while drawing animations and illustrations. It's so beautiful exploring different pockets of creativity. My brother, Jamieson John, is a pianist and we collaborate on art and music.

The connection between humans and nature inspires me, and I'm influenced by the many human-made systems that feel unnatural, incorporating these into my work. I hope my art expresses our relationship with nature and that it helps to reshape a world that aligns with ourselves more.

I'm grateful to have family on the Mornington Peninsula; seeing the horizon across the bay is so freeing! I find that when I draw and write, even though the page is close, my internal horizon is so very far. I'm also grateful to draw, inspired by the ocean, for Western Port Writes – a beautiful group of people, who are holding writers and creatives in a space surrounded by nature.

People can find me by the ocean or surrounded by trees. If you would like to find me online, my Instagram is [tillyalicefay](https://www.instagram.com/tillyalicefay).

Coolart Wetlands and Homestead – A Place of History, Nature and Community

Nestled on the shores of Western Port Bay, Coolart Wetlands and Homestead continues to delight visitors with its unique blend of natural beauty, rich history and community spirit. Managed by Parks Victoria and supported by the dedicated volunteers of Friends of Coolart, the property has become one of the Mornington Peninsula's treasured destinations for both locals and tourists alike.

The historic homestead, built in the late 19th century, offers visitors a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the early pastoral families who once occupied the estate. With its sweeping verandahs, period furnishings and extensive gardens, the homestead remains a centrepiece of the property and an important reminder of the Peninsula's heritage. Volunteers regularly open the homestead to the public on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays, welcoming increasing numbers of visitors eager to learn more about Coolart's remarkable history.

The wetlands themselves are equally significant. Renowned for their birdlife, the wetlands provide habitat for a wide variety of native and migratory species, attracting birdwatchers, photographers and nature lovers throughout the year. Seasonal changes across the lagoons and surrounding bushland ensure that no two visits to Coolart are ever quite the same.

From black swans gliding across the water to the calls of kookaburras echoing through the trees, the property offers a peaceful and immersive natural experience.

Community involvement remains at the heart of Coolart's success. Friends of Coolart volunteers contribute thousands of hours each year assisting with homestead guiding, gardening, conservation work, staffing the gift shop and supporting public events. The group also hosts exhibitions, tours, educational visits and community gatherings that help strengthen connections between people and place.

Tour groups and school visits have also increased significantly in recent times. Students visiting through programs such as the nearby Somers School Camp are given the opportunity to explore both the environmental and historical significance of the property, often leaving with a deeper appreciation of conservation and local heritage.

Whether visitors come for the history, the wildlife, the walking trails or simply the tranquillity of the surrounds, Coolart Wetlands and Homestead continues to offer a very special experience. In an increasingly busy world, places such as Coolart remind us of the importance of preserving our natural and cultural heritage for future generations to enjoy.



Western Port Writes 2026 will be based at Coolart.

Meet some of the WPW 2026 authors

We are excited to share a sneak peek of just a few of the authors joining us in October for the second Western Port Writes Literary Festival. We're delighted that these talented writers will be in conversations or on panels chatting about their books. Our theme this year is *What's the Narrative?* We'll be exploring what drives the stories that writers share. Our Festival Program will be released in August 2026, so keep watching our socials and website for updates. And subscribe to our Enews for Earlybird ticketing.



Chris Flynn

Born in Belfast, Chris Flynn now lives in a small town in regional Victoria. He is the author of *Orpheus Nine*, *Mammoth* and *A Tiger in Eden*, the story collection *Here Be Leviathans*, and three books for children in association with Museums Victoria. Chris's books have been shortlisted for and won prizes such as the Indie Book Award, Commonwealth Book Prize, Russell Prize for Humour, Queensland Premier's Literary Award and Aurealis Award (most recently winning Best Horror Novel 2025 for *Orpheus Nine*).



Caroline Parker

Caroline Parker is a degree-qualified herbalist, author, award-winning tea blender, and the voice behind *The Cottage Herbalist*. Based in the Wombat Forest in Central Victoria, her world revolves around growing, foraging and working with healing plants. She shares this knowledge through hands-on workshops, foraging walks, and her internationally released book *The Medicinal Garden*. Caroline is part of the gardening teams at Acre of Roses and Trentham Estate and is furthering her studies in horticulture. Her work is rooted in seasonal living, and connecting people to the land.



Melissa Manning

Melissa Manning is an Australian writer. Her first novel, *Frogsong* was published in 2026. Her debut interlinked story collection, *Smokehouse*, won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Fiction (2022), and was shortlisted for the USQ Steele Rudd Award for a Short Story Collection. Her short fiction and narrative non-fiction has been awarded and published in literary journals and anthologies, including *Overland*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, *The Big Issue*, *To Carry Her Home (UK)*, and *Best Small Fictions (USA)*.



Tyson Yunkaporta

Tyson Yunkaporta belongs to the Apalech Clan in Far North Queensland. He is a researcher at Deakin University and author of the Sand Talk trilogy: *Sand talk*; *Right Story Wrong Story*; and *Snake Talk*. He investigates complex issues of global catastrophic risk using Indigenous systems knowledge and methods of inquiry. He is the founder of the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lab.



Paul Strangio

Paul Strangio is an emeritus professor of politics at Monash University. A political historian, he is the author and editor of more than a dozen books on Australian politics specialising in the field of political leadership. Paul is a dual winner of the biennial Henry Mayer Prize for the best book on Australian politics. His most recent book is *The Alchemy of Leadership: Seven Australian Prime Ministers in a Turbulent Twenty-first Century*. For many years, Paul has also been one of the country's leading scholarly commentators on politics.



Claire Thomas

Claire Thomas is a writer from Naarm/Melbourne. Her novel, *The Performance* was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award and shortlisted for the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Her debut novel, *Fugitive Blue*, won the Dobbie Award for Women Writers and was longlisted for the Miles Franklin. Claire's latest novel, *On Not Climbing Mountains*, was written with the support of a residency at the Fondation Jan Michalski in Montricher, Switzerland. She holds a PhD from the University of Melbourne and has worked as a mentor, lecturer, supervisor and teacher for many years.



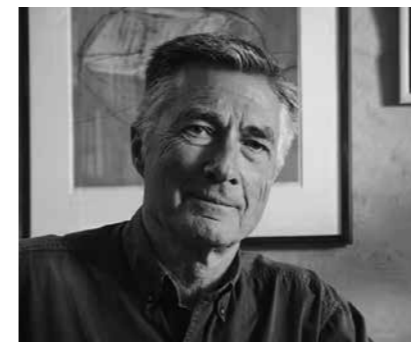
Josh Neille

Josh Neille is a family-driven wildlife carer based in Victoria, Australia, dedicating his life to rescuing and rehabilitating native animals. He specialises in wombats, and cares for kangaroos, turtles, possums, emus, birds of prey, and other native birds, while safely catching and managing snakes and reptiles. His work blends hands-on care with a focus on education, inspiring others to respect and protect Australia's unique wildlife. Josh believes the next generation is key, actively involving kids in the journey to foster compassion and awareness. He shares his family's story in his book, *Growing up Wombat*.



Michael Winkler

Michael Winkler is a writer of fiction and non-fiction. His latest novel, *Griefdog*, is about a Mildura water scientist who wants to live as the family pet but discovers this gives him unwanted insights into secret grief. His previous novel, *Grimmish*, shortlisted for the 2022 Miles Franklin Literary Award, was published in the UK, North America and Spain (in translation). Michael won the Calibre prize for his essay 'The Great Red Whale' under the rock sometimes called Uluru, settler - First Nations relationships, Moby Dick and mental health. His journalism, reviews, short fiction and essays have been widely published and anthologized.



Garry Disher

Garry Disher grew up on a farm in the mid-north of South Australia, the setting of his popular Hirsch crime novels and the Booker Prize nominated literary novel, *The Sunken Road*. A full-time writer, he lives on the Mornington Peninsula and is the author of 60 titles: general and children's/young adult fiction, and the widely translated and award-winning, Wyatt and Peninsula crime novels. In 2023 he was awarded the Australian Crime Writers Association's lifetime achievement award. His latest titles are the fifth Hirsch novel, *Mischance Creek*, and a stand-alone thriller, *Sanctuary*, shortlisted for several awards.

Being Victoria Brownlee

By Belinda Hawkins

Ping! My phone demands immediate attention.

'Here in a white shirt.'

Armed only with a notebook, a pen and an oversized battered leather handbag, I'm in Mornington to interview writer, Victoria Brownlee.

Her latest novel is a murder mystery set at a writers' retreat in the south of France. One of the central characters shares my name. It's unnerving.

Searching for clues in the message, I start texting that I'm here too and also in a white shirt. As I turn to my bag, I can see she's right there next to me, with huge brown eyes and an electric smile that seem to say *Relax, it's a beautiful day and there's no one I would rather be having coffee in the sunshine with than you.*

Little did I know then that Victoria's teenage dream was to be a journalist. Nor that she'd trained in the dark art of seduction.

By the time our lattes arrive, Victoria's done what the best in the trade can achieve without anyone noticing; she's got me divulging deep dark secrets.



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As I pick up a teaspoon to take the heart-shaped froth from the top, I'm struggling to get my interview with this beguiling writer back on track. Deep in the icy cold recesses of my hardened hack's heart, I know I'm falling for Victoria's endearing self-effacement and wonderful sense of humour, and would do just about anything to tag along on her thrill-a-minute ride through life, whether that be as her children's nanny, her cleaner, or even her myopic errand buddy.

Like her characters, there's more to Victoria than meets the eye.

'My life is chaos,' she admits. 'Most of the time I love chaos; that's why we move around so much.'

But her heartfelt interest in people and how they interact with the world is the compass arm that's remained steady for as long as she can remember.

Victoria Brownlee, 40, grew up near Bendigo, the youngest of three sisters and the organised goodie goodie who got A+ for pretty well everything, including cooking. The kitchen was the creative heart of her family's country farmhouse.

'My mother and I bonded over food,' Victoria explains. 'She made us exotic dishes, not the spag bol I now cook up for my children. It was exciting!'

Crazy brave at 16, she badgered her parents to let her go to school in France for Year 11. 'I had an unjustifiable air of confidence,' she says, 'and was ready to do things.'

Turned out she and the host family in Bordeaux were a mismatch so she endured bouts of homesickness and loneliness, but found the experience fascinating. 'What else would I be doing if I didn't do that,' she quips.

And, of course, she smashed French.

Victoria's passion was writing. So too was figuring out just what made people tick.

When Victoria had to pick a tertiary course, journalism made sense.

Yet she balked at the prospect of digging up dirt. Suffering from imposter syndrome, she doubted she could ever be a Kate McClymont or a Nick McKenzie.

'I didn't have that cutthroat, killer instinct,' Victoria says. 'I am more of a chill person so I took up travel and food writing instead.'

That came naturally.

Ever since Victoria and her partner, Jamie, met at Melbourne University, the couple has travelled through Europe incessantly with regular stops in Paris where he was born to a French mum and a Scottish dad. She started blogging about the places they visited and the dishes they loved.

'I really like doing new things and get bored easily,' she says. 'Luckily my husband's the same.'



When Jamie got a job in China, the couple shifted gears and moved to Shanghai for two years. Victoria became the food and drink editor at *Time Out Shanghai*.

'The role was deadline oriented and stimulating,' she says. 'The expat community then was thriving; we went to Mandarin classes and loved all of the eight great Chinese cuisines.'

But when it came to writing, Victoria was already experimenting with something new. Something that would also make her laugh.

'Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* got me through Year 12,' she says. 'I loved it. But it also made me nervous about trying to write fiction. I thought I'd have to be really deep and impressive. I just needed to give myself permission to write romantic comedy.'

That happened when the couple moved to Paris in 2016.

Victoria's debut novel *Fromage à Trois* (published in 2018), tells the story of a young woman who tries to heal a broken heart by going to Paris with the aim of eating 365 different cheeses in a year. It was so popular, she started on a sequel called *Brioche in the Oven*, but this time she was also nursing her newborn daughter, Clementine.

Soon Victoria and Jamie decided they needed a new challenge so they bought a 300-year-old stone cottage in the south of France and started renovating it. Between the hammering and the endless search for tradies, Victoria gave birth to their son, Hugo.

'After a while we worried that Clementine's English was sounding too French,' Victoria says. 'She was rolling her Rs and putting down Hugo for coming from the provinces rather than Paris. It was time to come home.'



Three years ago, the family moved to Mornington and Victoria took to her laptop yet again.

Published in 2025, her third novel, *Eat Your Heart Out*, follows the subterfuge and sabotage that occurs when a group of world-class food writers compete for the chance to write the tell-all memoir of a controversial celebrity chef.

'It let me keep a toe in France while adjusting to life here,' she says. 'And it let me carve out time to myself.'

Still not content to kick back and just hang with the other parents at Little Athletics competitions, Victoria now teaches French on the Mornington Peninsula and has just published her first thriller, *The Writers Retreat*.

What possessed her to move from rom-coms to murder, I ask.

'At first I wasn't sure I could write in this genre as I like to be kind to my characters,' Victoria laughs.

'I never plan my novels; I tend to throw a group of people together somewhere and see what happens. But writing suspense is like doing a puzzle and is more complex to plot out. In this one there's an isolated setting, a cookbook, a lot of gossip, a possible love match, some plagiarism and a mystery that ends in a bit of violence. Do I forgive the killer? Yes. Might I in real life? Well, that's another story.'

Surely that's the beauty of fiction.

Scoffing down the slice my interviewee didn't touch, I decide that's also the beauty of being Victoria Brownlee.

Victoria Brownlee is appearing at Western Port Writes Festival 2026. *The Writers Retreat* is published by Affirm Press (2026) and available at Petersen's Book store in Hastings.

Much Colder Now

By Tessa Moriarty

For many of us it begins with the sea and the gradual chill that builds through autumn. At the end of the swim, it's the talking point.

'Crisp in don't you think?'

'Yes, definitely getting colder!'

Then the mornings change, though it isn't sudden, because Mother Nature in her benevolence gives us time to adapt, as the sun takes a little longer each day to rise from her slumber. And though we created daylight saving as a way to stretch out the inevitable change of the seasons that we so desperately resist – the lazy drench of summer and the balmy days of early autumn leave us.

But it's the opening light of day and the shutdown at dusk that I find hardest to move with. To oscillate and readjust my rhythm and routine. It's almost a grief I feel at letting go of long days and the naked freedom of summer. And I don't just mean that physically. It's an absence of life's emotional layers that the warmth affords us in those hot months, that I miss.

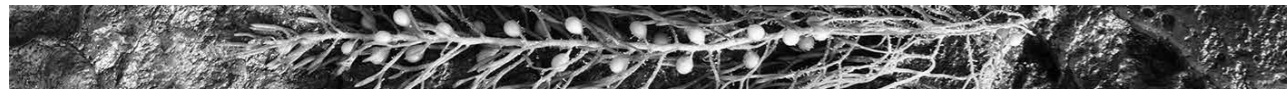
But let go and change I must. Because the burn of summer comes to an end, and the waning heat and parched lands of our beautiful Western Port need time to restore and replenish (just as we do). Across this Peninsula – everywhere you look, the autumn heralds a vibrant show of colour. But before the shedding of leaves, there is a glow, a fire, and a flourish of life and activity ahead of the withdrawal and retreat that comes with winter.

And so it is with the sea. As the temperature drops, in the water as on land we bring back the coverings that summer life lets us lose. Out comes the neoprene to soften the biting chill, and though some of us weather the freeze against our bare skin through the cold, it is the cold that we all swim for. It is what our bodies and our spirits yearn to be immersed in. And paradoxically – it is this very cold that warms us. Lighting the internal fires that keep our moods buoyed through the dark grey of those wet months.

It comes to pass then, as it always does, that winter is here again. That the skies are clouded, that the southerlies are our predominant winds, and our gardens, and the bushlands and pastures around us take a soaking from the frequent downpour of the skies. Though the lands may be greener, the bloom of spring, summer and autumn disappears. Nature goes to ground and tells us that so should we.

As I age, I have learned to attune myself better to the lessons of the seasons. Even in a busy life with a hectic schedule I know that winter is also about my own internal restoration. That I need time to pull back from the connection with others and the world to recover what those connections can take. Sometimes it's just the revitalisation of a few good nights' sleep. Other times the restoration requires deep reflection, time out and a reset. Then because of inevitable changes in life circumstance – retirement, loss of relationship, death of a loved one, even the decline of function associated with ageing, there is adjustment after adjustment to make, in order to keep moving.

It begins with the sea, and it closes there too, as the tide comes in and the tide goes out. Twice a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, the sea mirrors the seasons. Many of us rely on it, it is our constant. 'Much colder now,' my friend says as we dress on the beach. 'Yes,' I reply, 'isn't it beautiful.'



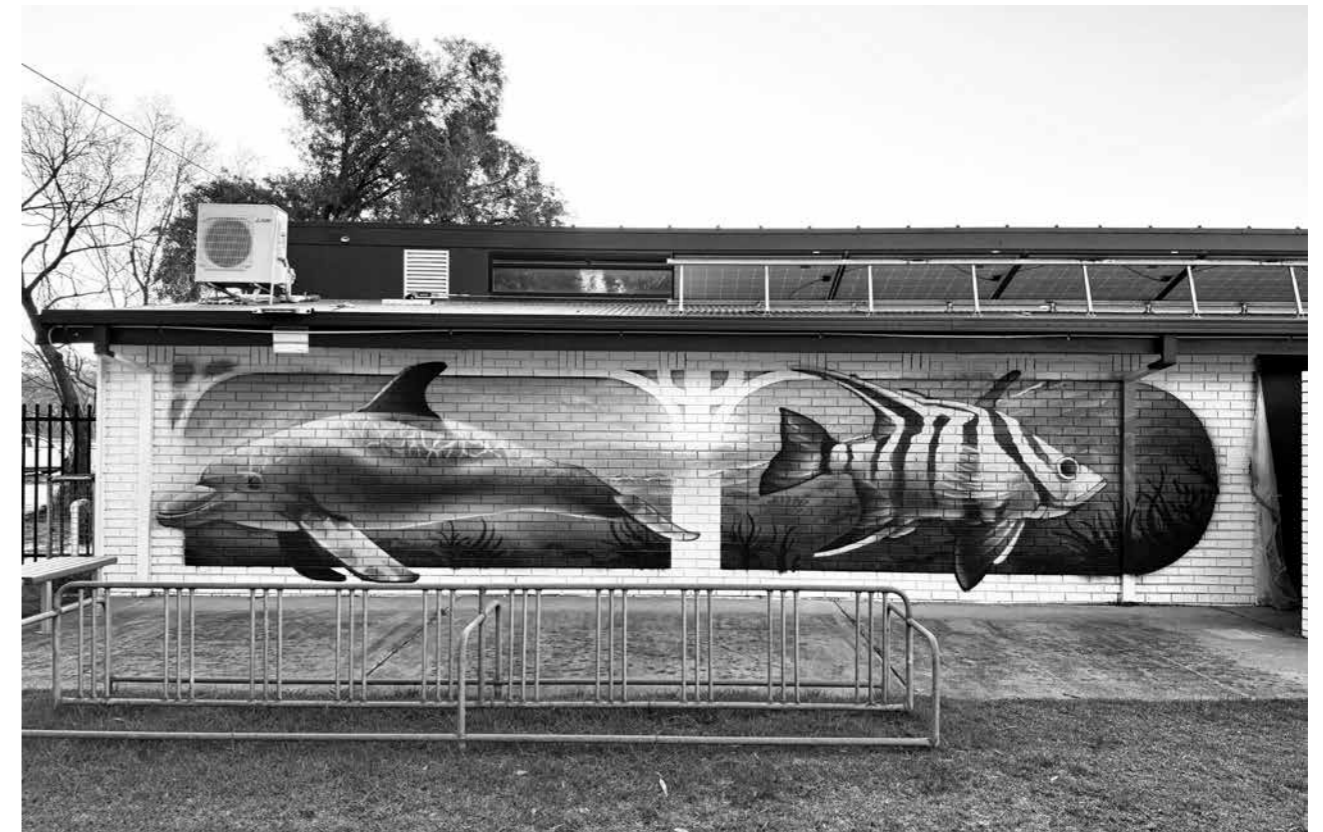
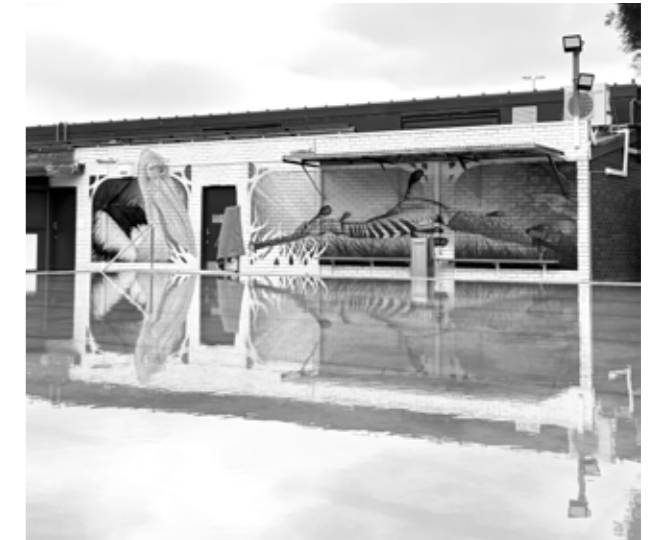
Mural Marks 50 Years

Mornington Peninsula Shire has launched a vibrant new mural at Crib Point Pool by artist Daniel van de Wiel, created to mark the pool's 50th year. Reflecting native birdlife and the area's relaxed coastal rhythm, the work celebrates community connection and place.

Locals helped shape the final design through a community vote. Known for his expressive large-scale works, Daniel van de Wiel has transformed the pool into a colourful landmark that honours shared memories and summer traditions.

The artist said creating the mural was about reflecting the energy and nostalgia tied to outdoor pools, as well as the immediate environment and ecosystems surrounding the pool's location.

'I wanted the mural to feel vibrant, playful and connected to the natural environment, much like summer at the pool,' he said. 'Crib Point Pool is a beautiful place and holds so many shared memories, and it was special to reflect that.'



Western Port Down Under

Marine wonderland on our doorstep

'Western Port does not get the recognition or support it needs. We're helping shape a future where Western Port's unique natural and cultural values are understood, celebrated and preserved. We need resources to show people what's under the water.'



Sheree Marris is a ball of stylish, effusive energy – long hair, lean and tall – made to glide along the ocean floor, mermaid-like. Speaking to a crowded room of locals at the Somers Yacht Club on a dark autumn night, her love of Western Port overflows in a wave of storytelling about the ecological wonders that lie beneath the surface of the Bay. She's here to tell us about a new project for Western Port. And we're invested – we love our Bay.

Sheree is a marine biologist, a documentary maker, author, global traveller, lover of underwater exploration, advocate for marine conservation, and former Young Australian of the Year (Victoria). And she's homegrown: a Mornington Peninsula gal who spent part of her childhood in Hastings.

With Sheree are three marine experts: Dr Sue Mason, a whale and dolphin biologist and science educator who has researched the common dolphins that live in Port Phillip and Western Port bays; Graeme Burgan, a conservationist who has tracked migrating shearwaters across the globe, monitoring their annual arrival at Phillip Island; and Ian Stevenson, an environmental scientist and Chair of the Western Port Seagrass Partnership that focuses on

restoring marine habitats – seagrasses, mangroves and saltmarshes. Between them, they share stories of the rare and special flora and fauna that thrives in Western Port.

Did you know that the dolphins in our bay are bottlenose dolphins. They travel as a pod, except for one naughty lone dolphin. Over 300 Southern right whales frequent our waters, feeding as they move north to breeding grounds.

Or that one shearwater can cover over 150,000 kilometres in a year on its migration from the northern hemisphere. They feed on krill in Western Port.

Or that there's only one mangrove species in the bay, *Avicennia marina*, which was farmed in the 19th century to make shaving cream. That the mangroves, saltbush and seagrasses can store forty times more carbon than terrestrial plants. And there are 700 invertebrates living in the mudflats.

~

Sheree's next adventure is Western Port Down Under – an ambitious project that shines a light on the Bay. It includes a documentary, a website and more, bringing this little-known and exceptional waterway to prominence. We caught up with Sheree to ask how her love of the marine world grew fins.

As a child in Hastings, what was it like growing up near Western Port Bay?

Western Port meant adventure was always just outside the door. I spent countless hours exploring the coastline, wandering through mangroves and mudflats, discovering strange and beautiful creatures hiding in plain sight. It sparked a real sense of curiosity and wonder and gave me a deep connection to the ocean from a very young age.

Did you always want to be a marine biologist?

I was obsessed with the ocean, and originally dreamed of becoming a marine mammalogist, inspired by our resident dolphins. But everything changed when I discovered a nudibranch. Think of it like a land slug on 'psychedelics'. I couldn't believe something so colourful and bizarre existed right on my doorstep without needing to visit a tropical reef. I remember thinking, why hadn't anyone shown me this before?

What are the most remote or memorable waters you've visited?

I've been incredibly fortunate to work in some extraordinary places around the world, from reef monitoring expeditions in the Philippines to the Maldives, Borneo and remote marine environments across Australia. I've also worked on IMAX films, international exhibitions and underwater storytelling projects. But some of my most memorable experiences have been closer to home, filming rare behaviours and marine life moments that no one has captured before. You don't always have to travel to the ends of the Earth to find wonder.

You're also an author. Tell us about your books.

I love translating science into fun, digestible and entertaining stories, what I call 'edutainment' or education by stealth. Whether I'm writing for kids or adults, all my books aim to inspire curiosity, connection and appreciation for our incredible marine world. Topics range from seashore treasures, the weird world of animal reproduction to octopuses. My next project is a large-format interactive 'living book' showcasing the underwater wonders and marine life of Western Port, blending storytelling, science, photography and digital experiences.

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In 2015, Sheree was part of the team that produced *Melbourne Down Under*, a documentary that featured the marine life of Port Phillip Bay. Now, they're turning the spotlight on Western Port Bay.

What is Western Port Down Under?

Western Port Down Under is a bold, community-driven campaign that combines science, storytelling and strategy to showcase and protect one of Australia's most extraordinary yet underappreciated marine environments. The project includes a feature documentary, interactive 'living book', a school program, legacy resources and community events designed to inspire pride, curiosity and stewardship.



At its heart, the project is about helping people discover the hidden wonders of Western Port while resourcing schools, communities and local groups with world-class, scientifically robust content that encourages exploration, education and protection.

What's the most surprising aspect of Western Port Bay?

The sheer diversity, colour and complexity hiding beneath the surface. Most people see mudflats and mangroves, but below the water is an extraordinary world filled with hidden reefs, seagrass meadows, bizarre marine life and habitats found nowhere else on Earth.

Western Port is home to globally unique marine habitats and some truly extraordinary species. You can find living fossils, fairy-like fish, hidden reefs built by tiny underwater architects and even species that are completely new to science. And so much of this underwater world remains unexplored.

What small things can the public do to protect the Bay?

We protect what we value, so learn more about the bay and build a connection with it – explore your local coastline, support local community and conservation groups, reduce pollution and be mindful that what happens on land eventually flows into our marine environments. Small actions, like picking up litter, reducing plastics, supporting sustainable seafood and sharing knowledge, can collectively make a huge difference.

How can locals get involved with WPDU?

People can find out more about how to help at our website. Right now, we're focused on raising funds for the documentary and interactive living book, which will become the foundation resources that support all the other campaign elements including a school program, community engagement and legacy conservation initiatives.

Find out more or get involved:

W: www.westernportdownunder.com.au/

W: www.octopusesbook.com/



Thank you

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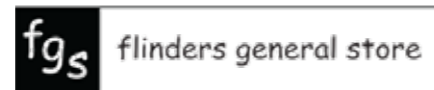


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Somers Yacht Club Inc

WPW Night of Nights: Dinner with Lisa Millar

On Saturday 31 May, 110 lucky people had Dinner with Lisa Millar at the Somers Yacht Club.

The occasion was the launch of the Western Port Writes 2026 festival year, and what a brilliant night it was. Guests enjoyed a feast of food while listening to a warm, entertaining conversation between the much-loved ABC journalist, author and face of *Muster Dogs* and *Back Roads*, Lisa Millar, and national and international journalist and former ABC and SBS reporter Belinda Hawkins.

Both women have navigated reporting from over-sea postings, covering major news stories in difficult and confronting conditions, and emerged with spirits intact. Both are Walkley Award winners.

From her early years, Lisa was captivated by the idea of a career in journalism and began interviewing family and friends as a child, living in a small country town. Her father, who became a renowned politician, fulfilled his dream of flying – owning his own small plane; yet Lisa developed a fear of flying which took time to overcome, despite aviation being a large part of her childhood.

She talked movingly about the pressures and toll of reporting on stories where ‘you see the worst’ but need to filter it so that viewers can see an acceptable version of the news. And the pressure cooker of breakfast television where trolls are a daily reality. And how she fought back.

Now, she has one of ‘the best roles in TV’, reminding us that life is beautiful in stories from *Back Roads* and *Muster Dogs*, which is now in production in the US. So much ground was traversed in a masterful interview by Belinda Hawkins, with a delightfully warm and funny cameo by Lisa’s fiancé, Simon.

What an insightful, impressive, warm and generous woman she is – with a million-watt smile and contagious laugh – and how lucky we were to spend an evening in such great company.

It was a packed house at Somers Yacht Club, and the queues were long at Petersen’s pop-up bookstore, as people enjoyed a chat with Lisa over book signings.





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