

# **The Fine Colour of Rust**

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## **A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR**

### **1. *The Fine Colour of Rust* is your third book and marks a departure in style for you. What inspired you to write it?**

You know how we all have a certain amount of commentary running on in our heads? How we are always making judgements, thinking about how we'll describe this incident later to the family, connecting things that have happened to us, or that we have heard, with what's going on in front of us? Well, some time ago I wrote a short story with Loretta as the main character, and after that I found that she'd got into my head and was running her own commentary alongside mine. And it was funny, and you would see me cackling away on my own like a madwoman. So I had to write a whole novel with Loretta in it, simply so I could share her observations. I can still hear her. It was one of those cases where a character won't let go, and the character drives the shape and style of the narrative.

Writing a book involves so many questions of how to assemble the bones of the story, how to move it forward, how to pace it and what to leave out. I felt that with this book some of the weight of those decisions was taken off me by the strength of the main character. Loretta ran her own campaign.

### **2. Why did you choose the title *The Fine Colour of Rust*?**

I've heard writers say that once they have the title the whole story falls into place and writing it is a breeze. I wish! For me the title always comes last and it's always a struggle. This book had many different titles before I found the right one. At one point, it was called *Unseen*. That would be a big seller, for sure...

I've spent quite a bit of time in Japan, and it was while I was talking to a Japanese friend that I remembered there is a word in Japanese for something that is often forgotten in the contemporary world. The word is *sabi*, and it describes an appreciation of imperfect and old things. Loretta's world is full of imperfect things and imperfect people, yet they are all valuable and wonderful in their own fashion. That's one thing I hoped I could get across in the book, and from there came the title. Even a junkyard has intrinsic beauty.

### **3. Is Gunapan a real town? Why did you choose this setting for your novel?**

Gunapan isn't a real town, although Gunapan is actually the Aboriginal name for a place in Victoria that we call Bald Hill. (I wonder how many Bald Hills there are in the world?) But Gunapan is based on several places I've lived. During the

recent drought in south-eastern Australia, which lasted thirteen years, small country towns suffered badly. The farms that brought in the money had crop failures year after year, and consequently shops in local towns lost business. The trickle down effect always seems to work for poverty but not for wealth.

As the drought dragged on, community sporting grounds had to close because the ground was as hard as concrete and they weren't allowed to water it, local pools were emptied, showers in the home were supposed to take no more than four minutes. The droughts come in cycles here, and they hit hard, and they hit the poorest people hardest.

A lot of people think of Australia as being either Sydney and the Opera House – big cities – or the outback, huge tracts of dry land with a few indigenous people and miners. But Australia also has a lot of small towns. They're usually fairly close-knit, not particularly prosperous, and peopled with real individuals. These folk aren't necessarily eccentrics but, because they aren't trying to live up to an idea of proper suburban life or sophisticated city living, they are free to be themselves.

They're the people I wanted to write about, and that's where they live. They stay despite the difficulties of small town life in a harsh climate. Communities there are forged in adversity.

**4. Is the character Loretta based on anyone? Do you think readers will relate to her?**

I think anyone who has ever bought a pack of discount undies will relate to Loretta. Ditto anyone whose daughter has rolled her eyes and asked in horror is her mother really going to wear that outfit outside the house? Loretta is based on all the mothers I know. It's a constant battle juggling work and childcare and school and money and tantrums and time, but they get through it all with a good laugh (and also, at times, clenched teeth).

**5. On page 109, Trudy states: 'You might think it's funny having a witch in the town, but you won't think it's funny when it gets out of hand. We need to stop this right now, before the devil sneaks into Gunapan'. Is this a dig at the 'backwards' attitude that some of the Gunapan inhabitants seem to possess?**

What I enjoyed about writing that scene was juxtaposing Leanne's Diploma in Wiccan Herbal and Magickal Therapy with the fundamentalist idea that the devil is a real creature, probably with cloven feet and bad breath, who might appear in the lounge room one day to cart you off to Hell. The capacity of the human mind for belief in unproveable things is unlimited. And yet it is bizarre that people who believe firmly in the ability of witches to fly will deride and dismiss another group of people who believe that the world began 6000 years ago who in turn sneer at

another group who hook themselves up to machines and believe we're descended from aliens. Faith and intolerance often go hand in hand.

I'm not saying that tolerance is the answer to all problems. Things such as violence should never be tolerated. But in a small town such as Gunapan, the only way to get on is to allow others their own beliefs, no matter how weird they may seem to you.

**6. Did you have Norm's death planned from the outset? What do you think it adds to the story?**

I didn't plan his death and when I realised he was going to die, I was devastated. I love Norm. I was born late into my family and by the time I arrived all four of my grandparents had died – Norm is like the grandfather I never had.

But the story did demand his death. A novel is something like a whole life – so much happens in it and much of what happens is painful and hard to bear. But we go on, and certain events, wrenching as they are, force us to move in directions we have avoided before, or take actions that we were afraid to take. Although Norm's death tears a great hole in Loretta's life, it also gives her the impetus to take up his cause and see it through.

**7. On page 170, you state: 'Don't you realize that bullies are losers?...No one respects them and absolutely no one likes them.' Why did you include such a strong anti-bullying message in the novel?**

Is there anyone in the world who hasn't experienced bullying? You can be the bully or the bullied or the unwilling onlooker. When I was in Grade Six, I was the target of a bullying episode that shattered my whole world view. Until then, I'd thought these kids were my friends. After a few months, the episode passed as suddenly as it had occurred, thanks to a teacher noticing and stepping in, but it made me aware of the jealousies and rivalries seething around me – things of which I'd been completely ignorant.

I still know one of the girls who initiated that bullying, and she is a lovely woman. It took me years to realise that the bullying she did was out of her control because it came from emotions she didn't understand herself. She was too young. I don't think she remembers the episode that I found so distressing and remember vividly to this day.

Bullying of and by children in schools and online is rife, and I think it's the adults' job both to notice and to take action. Not punitive action, but action which recognises the powerful unconscious drives that lead kids to behave this way.

## **8. What should the reader take away from this novel?**

While the novel raises contentious social problems, I think that with Loretta as narrator it carries its content lightly. So I hope that the reader closes the last page in the book smiling, but is left with questions that will come back to her as she moves through her day. Our ordinary lives present a series of questions about how we will live and what we choose to do and who we choose to support. These may seem like small decisions, but they are the cornerstone of individual identity. They determine what kind of life we will lead.