

MEDIA KIT



Wendy Gruner

CHILDREN OF A FARAWAY WAR

IGUANA BOOKS NEW RELEASE

Praise for *Children of a Faraway War*:

“Wendy Gruner has written a tender, witty memoir of the father she and her sister barely knew. This record of a young Australian airman’s life and death is a robust act of imagination and love. With their father’s diary (and a somewhat unreliable GPS) to guide them, Gruner and her sister travel to forgotten airbases, seaside towns, B&Bs and graveyards as they retrace their father’s steps during the Second World War. With warmth and generosity, Gruner brings a dead man back to life. Readers will be entertained and moved by this delightful book.”

— Diana Fitzgerald Bryden, author of *No Place Strange*



PRESS RELEASE

Nov. 5, 2019

TORONTO — In time for Remembrance Day, a new WWII memoir tells the gripping story of two sisters who journey from Canada and Australia to England to learn more about the father they never knew.

Children of a Faraway War (to be released on Nov. 11 by Toronto publisher Iguana Books) follows Australian-born sisters Wendy and Robbie on their life-changing quest to learn more about their father, an Australian orchardist who died in England during World War II while serving in Bomber Command. Because of their mother's reticence and their reluctance to probe her grief, they grow up knowing very little about the man who could have been a father to them. Separated by half a world, Robbie in Australia, Wendy in Canada, they plan a trip to England in their seventies as a kind of homage to this missing dad.

This journey of discovery, undertaken so late in their lives and guided by the one artefact they have, his wartime diary, leads them the length and breadth of the UK. Their travels, ranging from the hilarious to the serendipitous to the deeply moving, allow them to recreate their father's story and the horror that was Bomber Command. Undertaken almost casually at first, their quest grows into a search for identity and an affirmation of the profound power of family, love, and memory.


Children of a Faraway War is Wendy Gruner's first book. A retired English teacher who was born in Orange, New South Wales, and who hitchhiked through Europe in the 1960s, she came to Canada in the mid-1960s and taught in Montreal and Mississauga (as well as Australia, the UK, and Korea) before retiring to Guelph, Ontario in 2016. Gruner studied

creative writing at University of Toronto (Mississauga campus) and the Humber School for Writers following her retirement and worked on this book on and off for seven years.

For more details about Wendy Gruner's background and the impetus for *Children of a Faraway War*, see the attached Q&A.

Wendy Gruner was born and educated in Australia. In her twenties she travelled, as many young Australians do, to the UK and explored Europe. She then drifted to Canada, where she married a Canadian and raised a family of three daughters. She taught high school English for thirty years, always writing, accumulating unfinished manuscripts and using the excuse of a busy life not to pursue publication. Retirement, a course at the Humber School for Writers, and a trip that demanded documenting resulted in a book. She now lives in Guelph, Ontario, where she continues to write.

Iguana Books is a Canadian hybrid publishing house that specializes in helping independent authors publish the most professional version of their book possible. Iguana Books has existed in various incarnations since 1991 and was relaunched as a sustainable publishing enterprise in 2011 by founder Greg Ioannou. Greg has a long history in publishing; he's edited well over 3,000 books, taught publishing at Ryerson University and George Brown College, served four terms as President of the Editors' Association of Canada, and is the CEO of Colborne Communications, a writing and editing company. He was inspired to start Iguana to address some of the structural problems facing traditional publishing and to help publish top-quality books that are unable, increasingly for structural reasons having to do with the publishing industry, to find a home in traditional houses. Iguana has published more than 120 books in genres ranging from mystery to suspense and memoir.



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Excerpt from *Children of a Faraway War*

I have no memory of him. I cannot conjure up his face, his voice, the warmth of his presence. But there is one scrap: a shred of our life while he was still alive, although far away at war, a memory from when I was two.

My mother is scrubbing the linoleum kitchen floor and would rather I keep out of her way. She sets me up with paper and crayons on the wood box in the back porch. "Write Daddy a letter," she tells me before returning to her task. I remember obediently wielding the crayon in the way of a toddler. But I became a cynic early. "This isn't real writing," I think to myself. "It isn't what Robbie does." This single memory, one of failure to connect, is all I have.

As a child, I had only the sketchiest idea of how he died. Some of my notions were simply invented. When my mother remarried, some five years after his death, I worried my eight-year-old head that he would suddenly reappear and be horrified to find this stranger running his orchard, living in his house, sleeping in his bed. I'd somehow embraced the romantic notion that he had been shot down over Germany and could miraculously have survived to return to us. I confided none of this to her that night, decades later, as we dined together in the Italian dusk. I let the moment slide. Over the years we, my sister and I, have let many such moments slip by.

My sister, Robbie, eighteen months my senior, has also been told of our mother's dream. We have both read of women who have similar dreams at the time of the death of husbands and lovers. We are not inclined to believe in divine portents. At best we might keep a wary open mind. Mummy, in particular was suspicious of the fanciful, the non-practical. She would purse her lips and let out a skeptical puff of air. But this dream, for us, is different. It is, I suppose, so vivid it is hard to discount. And it did predict or suggest something real.

If only she had started up, spilling her apron full of shells, letting the colander roll along the verandah scattering her dream peas, if she had run across the lawn through the dream trees toward her dream husband coming up the driveway, would he have dropped the kit bag slung over his shoulder and run to her in his turn? Would he have reached out and pulled her close and would she for a glorious moment have felt his solid reality? If she had done this, acted as she knew she should in her dream of his return, would this somehow have changed what happened that night?

Our mother, permanently wounded by her loss, struggling to run our little orchard and raise her two daughters, had remarried for convenience rather than love. It seemed impolite to speak of our dead father in this new family. This was so much her story, her grief, a subject never expressly forbidden, but also not nurtured. And, anyway, how would our stepfather, much older and with bad feet that kept him out of combat, feel if we paraded our war hero around the dinner table? This stepfather (and for all the years he held this role we never referred to him as anything else; he was never “Dad,” certainly not “Daddy”) lived in the shadow of the man whose orchard he had taken over. In the shed, where we graded and packed the apples, pears, plums, and cherries, was a large ink pad and an equally large stamp to label the wooden cases of fruit. “A. L. Plowman Orchardist” it proclaimed: our father’s name. It was never replaced by a stamp declaring “A. A. Chiswell Orchardist” to acknowledge the fellow actually growing, picking, and packing the fruit. I think my stepfather knew enough to leave this alone, although I do recall a moment in the shed as he stood, arms folded, gazing at the stacks of packed fruit bearing his predecessor’s name, when he muttered glumly, acknowledging this erosion of his identity, “I might as well be the bugger.”

And so years passed and questions were not asked. We felt it inappropriate. Mummy confided to a friend that she thought we did not care. To even think that, let alone write it, causes me pain. How could three people who loved each other, my sister, my mother and I, have been so unable to speak of this hole in our lives? Off we went, Robbie and I, to get an education, to see the world, to marry, have children, and then grandchildren, make lives apart from her. I married a Canadian and lived in Canada, depriving her of closeness to my three daughters who knew her only through rare visits, letters, and carefully chosen gifts. My sister, having lived in England, eventually returned to Australia and saw our mother often. Now this sister and attentive daughter wonders, to her growing bewilderment, why she never sat her down and said, “Tell me about Daddy.”

Memory is important; it needs tending. It is the only immortality I can cling to: the hope that those we have lost will live on in the stories told by the people who loved them. We have so little of our father. For a long time he was not given that chance of immortality. Not that he was forgotten, but we did not work at finding the memories and passing them on. We did not bring him into our world, my sister Robbie and I.

Until we decided to fix that.

Q&A with Wendy Gruner, author of *Children of a Faraway War*

Q: Tell us a bit about your upbringing and your education, including your travels. You're from Orange in New South Wales, are you not? Does that make you an Oranger? An Orangeite? An Orangerie?

Wendy Gruner: [laughs] Not sure. Actually, the town name is a bit unfortunate. Although this is a fruit growing area, apples, pears, plums and so forth, it is too cold to grow oranges. But yes, I was born there in 1941 and grew up on an orchard. My family, on both sides, were fruit growers. I went to local schools and then left to continue my education in Sydney. I got a BA and a Diploma of Education at Sydney University and then taught for a year in Sydney at Homebush Boys High. I got the travel bug and left for Europe as many young Australians do. It was a marvellous adventure, going by ship to Singapore, Aden, through the Suez Canal. By then I had met a friend to travel with, so we disembarked in Italy and hitchhiked through Europe to London, found a place to live and got teaching jobs. My sister, Robbie, was living in England at the time so I saw a lot of her and her family. I taught in the East End of London in Bethnal Green. There is a book in that experience! At one point I bought a car and my friend and I travelled to northern Europe. Later with another two friends I hitchhiked, this time to Greece. Then I met my mother in Naples. She had travelled by boat from Australia and we did some more exploring together.

Q: How did you end up in Canada?

Wendy: That's a story! When I was teaching in the UK, teachers could work there without paying taxes. That was a huge boost in income and very welcome. However, if you stayed over two years,

you had to repay those taxes. Well, I was coming up for the two years, didn't feel ready to go home but had to leave as I had spent all this extra money. Somebody at a party said I should consider Canada. I had never particularly wanted to go there ... ironic really as I ended up staying the rest of my life. I went by ship, landed in Montreal and looked for work. I taught at South Shore Catholic School for one year and Sir Winston Churchill High for four years. I met my husband, Tony, and had three children, and was a stay-at-home mum.

Q: How did you end up in Ontario?

Wendy: My husband went back to school to do his masters at McGill. This was during the time of the October Crisis and when Tony finished his course in 1974, we, as many English-speaking Quebecers did, left the province. We moved to Stratford, Ontario. Tony worked locally. After three years we moved to Mississauga where Tony worked at Ontario Research. Tony then started his own company. He was a chemical engineer and his company dealt with treatment of industrial waste water. When the kids were old enough, I began teaching again.

Q: Tell us about your teaching career.

Wendy: Well, I taught for a total of 30 years in four countries: Australia, the UK, Canada, and Korea. I taught English and History, at the secondary school level, and in the last five years of my career, I requalified as an ESL teacher. I've taught at many different schools, but most of my career after having kids was with Loyola Catholic Secondary School in Mississauga (15 years), St. Joe's Secondary School in Mississauga (two years), and Iona Catholic Secondary (six years). After retirement I worked for the Ministry of Education writing curriculum support documents, and I taught in Korea and the UK for a time. I also taught Korean teachers in Canada.

Q: How did you get into writing?

Wendy: I'd always written here and there, but I never found time to finish anything while I was working full-time and raising my daughters. While I was home with the kids I read something about Harlequin Books paying \$10,000 per manuscript, so I took a stab at writing a romance novel. I sent it to Harlequin, but it was rejected. A friend of mine who is in publishing declared it a "good" rejection letter and said I should work on and resubmit. I didn't.

Q: Have you studied writing or are you mostly self-taught?

Wendy: A bit of both, I'd say. Over the years I took several writing courses. The first was at University of Toronto, Mississauga, where I was told by a prof that I had no talent. I can't remember his name, but that stuck with me for a long time. The second course I took at UTM was with Rosemary Sullivan, who told me I *should* pursue writing as I *did* have talent! I told her my life was hectic: three teenagers, a husband starting his own business, and courses that I needed to do. Rosemary remarked tartly that if that was going to stand in the way of writing then I wasn't a real writer! I have done some writing workshops since then, including one with Sarah Selecky. I also attended Humber School for Writers for one session. That led to useful writing workshops with Karen Connelly. And it gave me confidence to get the book about my father [*Children of a Faraway War*, Iguana Books, Nov. 11, 2019] finished.

Q: Tell us about *Children of a Faraway War*. What made you want to write this book, and how did it come about?

Wendy: Well, the book really came about as the result of a trip I took with my sister, Robbie. Our father had died in the UK during World War II while serving in Bomber Command. We were four and five years old so never knew him. For our mother the loss was brutal. She spoke of him rarely. We felt it was an off-limits topic. She had his wartime diary that she finally let us see not long before she died. It was the most personal thing we had of him. Eventually, by then in our seventies, we decided to try to find this long-lost

father. We met in the UK and set out, with his diary as a guide, to visit all the places where he trained, served, and went on leave while in the Royal Air Force. It was a very special two weeks, moving and poignant but also very funny. We travel well together and are both slightly mad. Even after the trip we found out more. We did feel we had discovered him by the time it was over.

Q: When did you know that this journey needed to be a book?

Wendy: From the time we did this trip I thought it should be a book. Even while we were travelling, I said to Robbie, “There might be a book in this. You should write it.” She squeaked in horror, saying there was not a spare minute in her life, etc., and that I should do it. From start to publication the book has taken about seven years, but there were long intervals of inaction. When I get down to it, I actually write very quickly.

Q: What was the process like?

Wendy: The book was started not long after the trip, while we were still finding out new things. It ballooned into a 400-page manuscript. Robbie was visiting, read it, and in between roaring with laughter and weeping like a fountain declared it “wonderful.” Good for my ego! It has since been edited and pruned. Of course, I was not writing all the time. Life intervenes. In 2013 my husband was given a terminal cancer diagnosis. He underwent an experimental treatment, which involved our driving into Princess Margaret. I took my tablet with me and often wrote as I waited. He was hospitalized several times. And the writing kept me sane as I sat by his bed waiting for the worst. His death actually informs some of what I wrote about my mother after my father was killed. I finally understood the depths of this loss. After Tony’s death I did not touch the manuscript for some time. My course at Humber was suggested as something to do to help as I tried to cope with my loss.

Q: How did you settle on Iguana Books as your publisher?

Wendy: With encouragement from Diana Fitzgerald Bryden and Karen Connelly I sent the manuscript to a number of publishers, but with no joy. Then Diana called and suggested Iguana, and here we are. I knew nothing about hybrid publishing going into the process, but it has all gone fairly smoothly. With a hybrid publisher you pay for editing services and cover design and layout and distribution, and you keep more of the profits from the sale of each book than you would with a traditional publisher. It all seems very sane and I have enjoyed the process.

Q: Beyond memoir and one attempt at a romance novel, what other types of writing have you done? What are you working on now?

Wendy: I have written a little poetry but have never tried to get it published. I have also written some short stories, also, as yet, unpublished, though I did try submitting one once. I have a work of fiction plotted out and about one-quarter done. I have a children's story in the same condition. And I have the story of a trip to the Bahamas on our sailboat that's about three-quarters done. Finishing seems to be an issue.

Q: How did you end up in Guelph?

Wendy: After Tony died, I bought a house in Guelph at my daughters' urging (all three live there) and rented it out for a little over a year. Then I sold my house in Mississauga and moved to Guelph in July of 2016. Once I'd settled here, I did some renovations and began to poke about in the book once more. (The haven for writers provided by Guelph's best-known bookstore, The Bookshelf, was a huge help.)

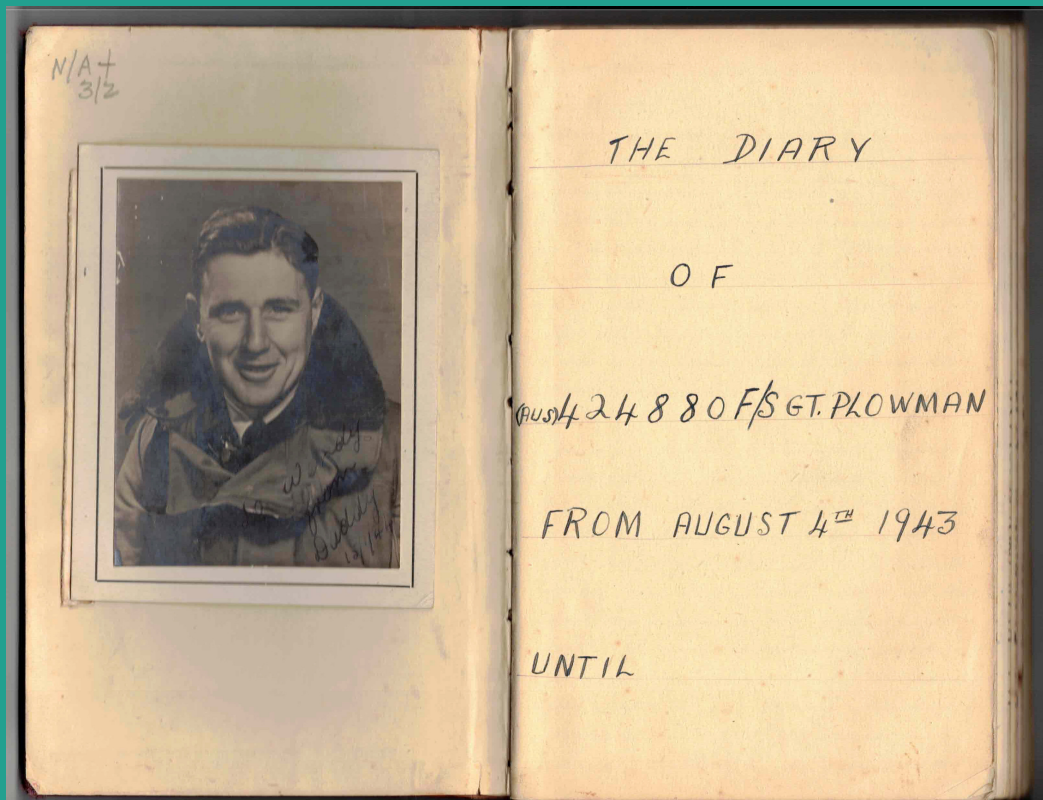
Q: Who is back in Australia still?

Wendy: My sister, Robbie, lives in northern NSW. She and her husband (ex, actually, but they ended up back together) have a macadamia nut farm. He is a retired dentist. They lived in the UK and then sailed, over a number of

years, back to Australia. Now their farm is up for sale and they are finally retiring. My brother, Bill (from my mother's second marriage), is in Sydney and I have four delightful nieces and nephews.

Q: What would you like people to learn from your story?

Wendy: I hope it will make people think about the importance and power of family. I also think it is an anti-war book. I suppose every book about war is. Our father's death, one among the 85 million who died in that war, changed so much for so many. If you don't have a father, for example, you don't really know what a father's role is. When I had kids, I was astonished that Tony wanted to be involved with them. I didn't know how he was supposed to do that. In my world mothers did everything. And I believe my mother died early because she had never fully coped with his death. The ripple effect of such loss is endless. Multiply that by all the deaths due to war ... well, it's dreadful. Having said that, this is not a gloomy book. I hope those who read it will also have fun as we did, running about the UK.



The wartime diary of the author's father, Pilot Officer Arthur Plowman

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27 Squadron, RAF. Spilsby, Lincolnshire, UK. 1944. Pilot officer Arthur Plowman appears in front of the outer port engine. Back row, fifth from the right.



Paddy (Arthur) and Nooney (Enid) Plowman with Robyn, three, and Wendy, almost two. 1943.

