

Paperback Hero

Gerald Glaskin was an unsung pioneer of gay writing in Australia. John Burbidge picks up the trail where history left off.

WHEN IT WAS published in the United Kingdom in 1965, Gerald Glaskin's novel, *No End to the Way*, was banned in Australia. The censors of the day considered its frank portrayal of a gay relationship between an advertising agent and a barman in suburban Perth too hot for the average Australian to handle. Apparently, the average Australian had other ideas. Two years later, when Congi/Transworld Publishers – who printed 50,000 copies – displayed the book in airports around the country, eager hands snapped it up.

And not only in airports. In his introduction to the anthology, *Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing*, author and critic Robert Dessaix wrote: "In a real sense, *No End to the Way* was the first Australian gay novel and it was available not just to the cognoscenti or to prowlers in the library stacks, but to fathers of three in the suburbs stopping off at a railway kiosk on their way home from work, to men in the suburbs curious about their own sexual inclinations – in other words, to ordinary Australian readers."

Their curiosity was well rewarded. The lurid narrative begins as Ray meets Cor in a bar, where the attraction is mutual and electric. Relentless sex soon evolves into a more enduring relationship, but one complicated by Cor's marriage to the pregnant Mia and the appearance of Robin Hamilton, Cor's ex-lover and sugar daddy. Out to destroy Cor's relationship with Ray, Hamilton offers the couple money to return to Holland, a ploy that pleases Mia and which Cor seemingly accepts. But at the last minute, Cor eludes Mia and the departing ship. Hamilton blackmails Ray, ruining his business and his health. Cor slides into a morass of drinking, promiscuity and violence, eventually heading east and a second attempt at marriage, while Ray takes a new job in Hong Kong.

The story reflects Glaskin's own struggle with sexuality. As a young man, Glaskin claimed that he "fell in love with girls but in lust with boys". With knock-your-socks-off good looks and charm to spare, it's little wonder that Glaskin had both sexes chasing after him. But men clearly won the day, whether Chinese friends from Singapore or fair-haired Friesians from more northern climes, not to mention the odd footballer or barman in little old Perth.

Like bookends to his life, Perth was Glaskin's home for his first 26 and last 26 years. Born in 1923 the eldest of seven children, Glaskin left school at 15 to help his working-class family make it through the Depression. When war broke out two years later, he joined the Royal Australian Navy, survived a near-fatal accident, and wound up in a repatriation hospital, which, ironically, launched him on his writing career. Three years later, he signed on to the Royal Australian Air Force and underwent aeronautical navigation training in Canada, before returning to Australia and civilian life.

His time in the services not only accelerated his passage to adulthood but also provided the grist for Glaskin's first novel, *A World of Our Own*. Although it took only six months to write, it took six years to be published, due mainly to the lack of interest from his London agent. When the book was finally published in 1955, Glaskin was awarded a £1000 Commonwealth Literary Fellowship. He would go on to publish another 19 books before his death in 2000 – novels, short stories, drama, travel, memoirs and parapsychology. All but two of them were published outside Australia.

When he wrote *No End to the Way*, Glaskin's British publishers insisted he use a pseudonym, for fear the book's controversial subject matter might tarnish his image as a writer. This puzzled Glaskin, and although he had serious misgivings about using a pen name, he acquiesced. His choice of pseudonym – Neville Jackson – is intriguing and underscores Glaskin's



combative nature. Although Glaskin called it a "popular misnomer", several people close to him swear that he coined it to get even with the legal system in Western Australia, with which he had several unpleasant encounters – and one particularly embarrassing one. Both Neville and Jackson were judges of the Supreme Court in Western Australia in the 1950s and '60s. Although neither dealt with Glaskin in court, they were the symbolic face of a system that Glaskin despised and an easy target on which to vent his anger.

The event that first occasioned this anger happened on a warm December day in 1960. Glaskin had just dropped off his Russian translator and colleague at their hotel, and headed for a lonely stretch of beach known as "the sun bowl" about a mile south of Perth's Scarborough Beach. Since

the beach appeared deserted, he took off his trunks to reveal a fundoshi underneath. According to two police officers who just happened to be in the area at the time, Glaskin revealed more than just a G-string. They claimed he was walking naked along the beach in the presence of at least three other men and charged him with having "wilfully and obscenely exposed his person".

Whatever the veracity of the charge, Glaskin wasn't about to let it go unchallenged. At his hearing in the Perth Police Court, mustering all the theatrical skills he could, he requested the suppression of the word "person" from the records and more particularly from press reports, voicing concern that "I would soon find a queue miles long from my house of people wanting to view this so generously sized 'person', only to disappoint them." He went on to add, "Buttocks might well be indecent to some but hardly obscene; moreover if two policemen should find them so, they shouldn't be in the police force."

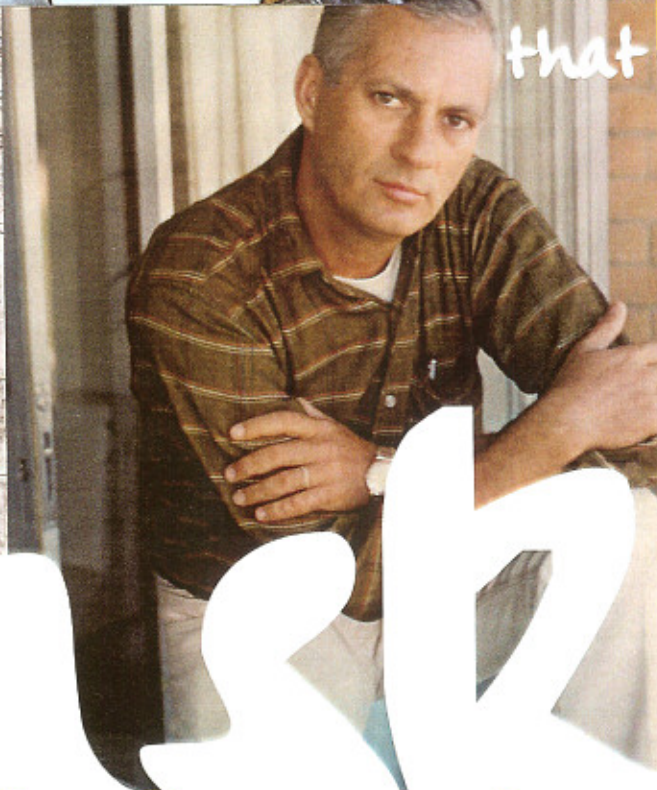
Magistrate Parker was unimpressed. In closing, he asked if the defendant had any other "literary comments" to make. Glaskin couldn't resist. With Wildean flair he proclaimed, "I am now indeed guilty of contempt of court." Glaskin was lucky not to be charged with that. Instead, the magistrate curtly dismissed Glaskin's fundoshi claim, found him guilty, fined him four shillings, and placed him on a £10 good behaviour bond for 12 months.

Given that *No End to the Way* is set in Perth and knowing Glaskin's penchant for modelling his novels on real-life experiences, it's not surprising that the book caused quite a stir in the city when it was released, especially in the fishbowl the gay community was in those days. As one of Glaskin's friends so delicately put it, "There were some people in Perth who would like to have seen Gerry's body washed up in the river because of that book."

Surprisingly, the person who probably had most reason to hold a grudge against Glaskin for using him as the basis for a character was fairly blasé about it. At least he is now. In the 1960s, Ken Sutherland had the unique distinction of being a professor of dentistry and a maker of chocolates, a rare and somewhat puzzling combination of talents →



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→ Sutherland was alerted to the fact that he appeared in *No End to the Way* when a friend called to say, "We think you're in it!" As Sutherland turned the pages, the character of "Old" Bruce Farnham stared back at him like a mirror image. Ever the gentleman, Sutherland's reaction to the news was one of polite protest. "I had no problem with Gerry using me in the book, except the reference to chocolate making. I was the new dean of the science faculty and on a number of committees. There was no mistaking the identity of the professor who made chocolates. I even made them for the governor and his wife, who were good friends of mine."

If he were alive to comment, another personality from the 1960s Perth gay scene would no doubt spew much more venom for Glaskin's thinly veiled inclusion of him in the book. A draftsman and theatre set designer, Sidney Davis was, by all accounts, a competent and intelligent man. But he was convinced that with the right amount of charm and persuasion he could entice any man to have sex with him. Said one of his contemporaries, "Nobody was safe. It was the lure of the conquest with him."

On the fourth page of the book, using the barely disguised name of Sid Needham, Glaskin paints a portrait of the man that could only be described as unflattering at best:

So back to the bars you look, and almost straight away you see Sid Needham, squashed – or rather squashing himself – in between two groups where it's easy to see he's got a prospect in each, and hasn't yet made up his mind on which to pounce ... he still looks the same as ever, dapper under his wavy hair, forever grinning those intimidating leers of his, his eyes skidding and plundering around the room all the time ... Impossible to think that he was the first one to seduce you, when you were just eighteen ... But Sid is nearly always the first to seduce everyone. It's his specialty. Takes 'em once – or maybe twice or a few times, just to make sure they're so far gone in the game they'll never get out of it again – and then tosses them into the circle.

While *No End to the Way* was Glaskin's "gay" novel, he never sought the dubious label of being "a gay writer". But he did want to be a provocative writer.

He liked to shock and jolt people out of their smug, middle-class Australian lethargy and naiveté. His books raised questions about matters many regarded as "off-limits" at the time: homosexuality, incest, prostitution, youth suicide, Australia's attitudes to Asia and its treatment of indigenous people. Perhaps it was his choice of subject matter, as much as his haughty and often belligerent style, which led Australian readers and publishers to largely ignore him. Europeans, on the other hand, lapped him up, and many of his books were published in translation.

Over the years, Glaskin's craving for success was fed by lures from film producers to make movies out of his books. No less than six were optioned for filming but only one, *A Waltz Through the Hills* (1961), made it on to the screen, and only television at that. Hopes of becoming rich from the sale of movie rights sent Glaskin on rollercoaster rides of euphoria and depression that added to the long list of ailments that plagued him throughout his life.

Glaskin's intense love-hate relationship with his homeland persisted to the end. Though he considered it "the most callous and moronic I have encountered anywhere", he found himself unable to resist Australia's charms, particularly its western shores and his beloved Cottesloe Beach. Cottesloe, ironically, was the scene of one Glaskin's several near-death experiences, when he crashed into another swimmer while body surfing. He suffered severe neck and spinal injuries and had to wear a neck brace for most of his remaining 33 years, enduring chronic pain. Although his literary output dwindled after this accident, he continued to write, travel, and provoke people with his sharp tongue.

Today, Glaskin remains largely a forgotten name in Australian literature. This audacious writer is little known outside a small circle of family and friends, many of whom Glaskin cut ties with in his later years. If Dessaux's description of *No End to the Way* as "astounding" and "a voice in the wilderness" is anywhere near the truth, perhaps Glaskin deserves a little more of the exposure he so much sought but rarely received. **B**

John Burbidge is working on a biography of Gerald Glaskin.