

Author's courage, talent revealed

BIOGRAPHY

Dare Me! The Life and Work of Gerald Glaskin

John Burbidge

Monash University Publishing, \$34.95

REVIEW DAVID HOUGH

For more than 20 years, G.M. Glaskin was one of Australia's most successful authors, judged by productivity, overseas sales and the number of languages into which his novels were translated. The literary establishment and Australian publishers ignored him.

Between 1955, when *A World of Our Own* appeared and 1974, the year of *Windows of the Mind*, Glaskin produced 10 novels, an anthology of short stories and a travelogue, *The Land that Sleeps*. Barrie & Rockliff published all but two in London.

The novels were translated into seven European languages — and Russian (for which he received no royalty).

Glaskin's only work to make it to film, despite options and negotiations, was *A Waltz Through the Hills*, a telemovie produced by Barron Films.

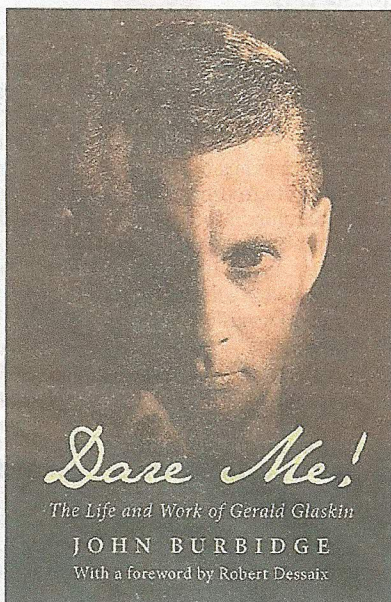
John Burbidge's biography, *Dare Me!* The life and work of Gerald Glaskin, is one of the best yet written about an Australian writer.

A compelling read, it looks to establish Glaskin not as a literary novelist but as a wonderful storyteller who benchmarked a number of themes current in Australian literature.

Glaskin was at the forefront in exploring our relationships with Asia, especially in *A Lion in the Sun* and *The Beach of Passionate Love*, and with the Aboriginal people, in *A Flight to Landfall*, for example.

Only Tim Winton evokes a sense of place better than Glaskin.

Few have understood loneliness or written about it as poignantly. He tackled issues of sexuality head on in *A Minor Portrait*, *O Love, O Loneliness*



and especially in *No End to the Way*, published in 1965 under the pseudonym Neville Jackson.

This courageous novel depicted a homosexual relationship in Perth in the 1960s and is as pioneering as Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*.

Burbidge, like Glaskin, is homosexual. This gives him an insight into many of the complexities of Glaskin's multi-faceted life and work, expressed with a candour that a straight writer might find difficult to emulate.

He tells his story with a muscular energy that Glaskin would have admired. He is scrupulous with his sources and references without overburdening the reader.

Glaskin was his own worst enemy — he fell out with just about everybody and spread himself too thinly. In Burbidge's hands, however, Glaskin emerges as a major portrait. Ⓢ

O Life

Jeremy Fisher

DARE ME! THE LIFE AND WORK
OF GERALD GLASKIN

by John Burbidge

Monash University Publishing
\$34.95 pb, 349 pp, 9781921867743

Never heard of him – that's the most common reaction when I mention Gerry Glaskin. Some Western Australians remember him, as they should: he was born and spent his last years there. Yet in between he was a bestselling novelist in the 1950s and 1960s. He was translated into French, German, Swedish, Russian, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, Danish, and Norwegian. Doubleday commissioned him to write a book about northern Australia. He was also a prolific short story writer, with two published collections. All of this is documented in the appendix and reference list of *Dare Me!* So how and why has Glaskin been erased from the Australian literary consciousness?

That is the question driving John Burbidge's revealing yet compassionate biography. The conundrum for Glaskin was that he was much more successful outside Australia than within. Australian critics were also very unkind. In reviewing his first novel, *A World of Our Own* (1955), the *Southerly* critic, writing only under initials, said Gerry lacked 'almost all the qualities of the novelist'. Yet the book received a favourable review in *The Times* and sold 75,000 copies in Norway. Nor did it help that his main claim to literary fame was written under a pseudonym. That book, *No End to the Way*, was published in 1965 with the author listed as Neville Jackson. Published in London, the novel's subject matter, homosexuality, caused it to be banned in Australia. But it was Australia's first gay novel, and it is also a brilliant example of that rarity, a successfully sustained second-person narrative.

I differ with John Burbidge on one small but important point in his splendid evocation of Glaskin. That concerns Glaskin's oft-repeated claim that publishers Barrie & Rockliff forced him to

use the pseudonym Neville Jackson. My research shows that Glaskin suggested the pseudonym himself and wanted to write more books as Neville Jackson, but that his publishers demurred. Glaskin also came up with the working title, *You Can't Get Away from It*, and the final title. My information comes from the Barrie & Rockliff files in the Random House Archives in the United Kingdom, an archive that Burbidge acknowledges but in which he appears to have missed the files I accessed.

That matter aside, Burbidge has scoured the Glaskin archives thoroughly in every other way. He also corresponded with numerous friends and colleagues of Glaskin, including Han Suyin (he started his research while she was still alive), Alan Seymour, who wrote an unfilmed screenplay of *No End to the Way*, Tom Hungerford, and Clive Newman. He was also able to interview a number of Glaskin's sexual partners in Singapore from the 1950s and Amsterdam from the 1960s. This helps reveal intimate aspects of lives that would otherwise be unrecorded. The lifestyles of gay men in Australia in the 1950s are largely unknown, so this glimpse into how such men existed in Singapore and Amsterdam is fascinating.

Burbidge also had the support of Glaskin's partner, Leo van de Pas. This impressive research brings Glaskin back from near oblivion. Burbidge gives us Glaskin with all his charm as well as his furious obstinacy. We see him arrested for wilful exposure on a West Australian beach, suicidal in Amsterdam, frolicking with British soldiers in his Singapore flat, fighting with his neighbours in Perth, ferociously attacking the medical staff caring for him in his final days – and writing, writing, writing. For instance, he completed the 90,000-word manuscript of what would become *No End to the Way* (the original title was *O Life*) between September and November 1961, a year in which he published three other books.

Burbidge makes it clear that Glaskin was a complex man. Is he a great writer? Yes and no. *No End to the Way* is a considerable achievement. However, as Burbidge shows with other books, while Glaskin was a good storyteller,

he played around with narrative form so much that his publisher received an unpredictable, though extensive, output. Burbidge makes a good case for Glaskin lacking the discipline to refine his work. When writing he also proselytised and departed from the story. His publisher and editor John Bunting put it well in a letter of 18 December 1963 (not quoted in this book) when he said Glaskin had 'a tendency to continue banging the nail when it is safely embedded in the timber'. Barrie & Rockliff wanted more books like *Flight to Landfall* (1963), possibly Glaskin's most commercially successful book, thanks largely to its inclusion in the Reader's Digest Condensed Books program. *Flight to Landfall* is plot-driven, with rich characters.

What is without doubt is that Glaskin is himself a fascinating character. While he could have raging battles with some people, with others he had deep, lifelong friendships (though sometimes he fell out with old friends). His relationship with van de Pas, to whom the book is dedicated, is indicative of his contrariness. While the men were together from 1968, the relationship was tested by what Leo called Glaskin's incessant 'picking and bitching', but Leo resolved his differences and the two continued on as before. In the last two years of Glaskin's life, when the legacy of numerous injuries reduced his mobility and his health waned in other ways, Leo cared for him, even in the last months when Glaskin was hospitalised. As with the rest of this biography, Burbidge's telling of this part of the story is delicate and empathetic.

Never heard of Gerry Glaskin? With John Burbidge's biography, you no longer have any excuses. ■



Jeremy Fisher's latest book is *How to Tell Your Father to Drop Dead* (2013).

Misadventures of a pioneer of gay fiction

Peter Pierce

Dare Me! The Life and Work of Gerald Glaskin

By John Burbidge

Monash University Press, 329pp, \$34.95

JOHN Burbidge's arresting title, *Dare Me!*, refers both to the book's subject, "The Life and Works of Gerald Glaskin", and to the risk the author has taken in researching and writing a full-scale biography of an Australian writer who is scantily known.

Robert Dessaix's preface rails against this neglect: "It is as if Gerald Glaskin lived out his tumultuous and prolific life as a writer on the far side of the moon." (As Burbidge contends, Glaskin's birth in Western Australia and eventual resettling there amounted to the kind of cultural exile that Dessaix's metaphor suggests.)

For Dessaix, Glaskin was "the master of both charm and vitriol". He regards *No End to the Way* (published in 1965 under the pseudonym Neville Jackson) as one of the earliest and most important of Australian gay novels. Dessaix sets the bar high for Burbidge when he says of *Dare Me!* that "the biography of a very singular man, it is also the portrait of a nation".

The book begins and ends at Glaskin's beloved Cottesloe Beach, frequented with pleasure throughout his life, but also the site of

an arrest (scandalous in Perth) for nude bathing and of a 1967 surfing accident that left him in a neck brace for the final 33 years of his life.

Glaskin seems to have courted misadventure, whether in his homosexual engagements, physical mishaps that included (in a somewhat exaggerated version) nearly losing an arm in an accident while serving in the navy during World War II and in his rancorous and ultimately profitless feuds with literary agents, the Australia Council, the Australian Society of Authors, let alone in many personal enmities.

Glaskin raged against "the cult of the moron" in his native Australia, but after long sojourns in Singapore as a stockbroker (when he wrote his best fiction) and in Holland with various lovers (among them his long-term partner, Leo van de Pas), he eventually proved that — with what misgivings and trials — you can go home again.

Having committed to writing Glaskin's life, Burbidge was both pleased and dismayed that there was "a paper trail that would make even the most earnest researcher gasp for air". Although he never met Glaskin, Burbidge interviewed numerous acquaintances. Van de Pas was particularly helpful. Burbidge poses the question of whether the game was worth the candle. Was Glaskin "just a third-rate writer who had an early flash-in-the-pan success he could not sustain?"

In fact, the career was sustained and varied. Glaskin wrote "fiction and nonfiction, for adults and children, novels, short stories, novellas, memoirs, plays for stage and television, even a musical". Add to this a trilogy of books on parapsychology, many unpublished manuscripts. Even though he regarded Patrick White as "an old lady sitting with her knitting", he asked to write a screenplay of *The Twyborn Affair*. White politely declined: "The actor is the chief difficulty and if there is such a person, he will come to light in time — I am biding mine."

The eldest of seven children, Glaskin would cast himself as "the managing older brother". Burbidge engagingly relates the story of the first among siblings. One predictable element was Glaskin's sense of his family's ingratitude for financial assistance, another the disdain with which a couple of brothers reacted to his coming out.

Glaskin's financial probity, if not his sexual adventuring, may have been in reaction to his father, Gilbert, who was sacked for embezzlement and had children by one of his sisters-in-law. Deadpan, Burbidge tells us of Glaskin's sexual awakening: "Boy Scout camps are notoriously fertile grounds for sexual enlightenment."

Then came the navy. Singapore demanded more discretion; Holland gave more leeway. Although he would treat van de Pas poorly at

times, the relationship endured, partly because of Glaskin's abiding fear of loneliness.

While Burbidge tells us a good deal about Glaskin's sales (850,000 copies for *Flight to Landfall*, 1963) and his publishers (especially James Barrie, great-nephew and godson of the inventor of a character with whom the handsome Glaskin may have felt affinity, Peter Pan), more about the books would have been welcome. Glaskin's first novel, *A World of Our Own* (1955) was accepted on the recommendation of CP Snow, who wrote "I fancy he might become an important novelist, and certainly the best spokesman of contemporary Australian society".

If neither prediction was fully realised, Glaskin not only pioneered gay fiction, but was also the first postwar Australian novelist to turn to Asia as a setting. That orientation is usually dated from Christopher Koch's *Across the Sea Wall* (1965), but Glaskin preceded him with works of imaginative and political sympathy: *A Lion in the Sun* (1960) and *The Beach of Passionate Love* (1961).

Vividly presented in the many circumstances of a warring but productive life, Glaskin has well merited Burbidge's entertaining and scrupulous attention.

Peter Pierce edited the *Cambridge History of Australian Literature*.



Dare Me!

JOHN BURBIDGE

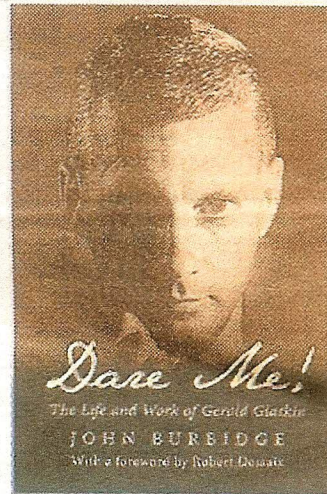
MONASH UNIVERSITY PRESS, \$34.95

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Steven Carroll, *The Age & The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, April 5th, 2014

DARE ME!. By John Burbidge.
Monash University Press. \$34.95.

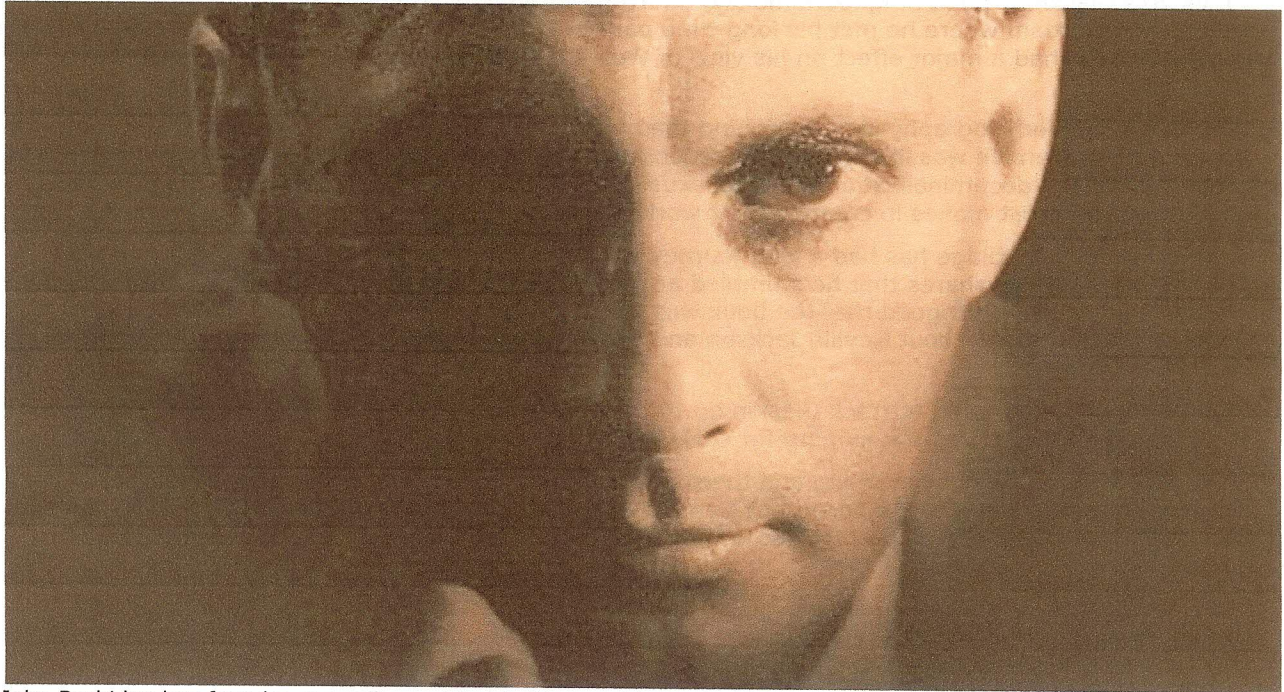
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Steven Carroll, *The Canberra Times*, Saturday, April 5th, 2014

Discovering Gerald Glaskin *by Graeme Watson*

15 Jun 2014 | Filed under Arts,Culture,Performing Arts | Posted by admin



John Burbidge has found a compelling subject in his new biography 'Dare Me! The Life and Work of Gerald Glaskin'.

Glaskin lived much of his life in Perth, was a successful author, although popular recognition would elude him. More importantly, and to be worthy of a biography, Glaskin was a compellingly interesting character.

Glaskin was defiantly openly gay long before it was legally or socially acceptable to be so, and one of his early works 'No End to the Way' was a thinly veiled portrait of queer life in Perth in the mid-1960s. He published the book under the pseudonym Neville Jackson. The book was promptly banned, but the publishers found a loop hole in the law that allowed them to distribute the book in Australia. It was illegal for the book to be shipped in, so they chartered planes.

Glaskin wrote many novels during his life but found a much greater level of success overseas than he did in his home country. Rather than sticking to one specific genre Glaskin was constantly changing the style of his writing and wrote across genres, focussing on a wide variety of subjects. One of the reasons that mainstream success eluded him was probably because an admirer of one of his books would find something completely different if they selected another of his works.

At the recent launch of the book historian Graham Willet described the biography as a work of great importance and interest.

"It's extensively and exhaustively researched," said Willet, highlighting that biographer John Burbidge had taken thirteen years to research his subject travelling to many different countries to track down the authenticity of the many different stories about the author. Glaskin was well known for adding a little embellishment to a story to entertain his friends, giving Burbidge the challenge of sorting fact from fiction.

Rather than taking a purely linear approach to Glaskin's life Burbidge takes us into the writer's life through many different paths. We find out about the author's family and ancestors – each with their

own amazing tales which gives us an insight into Western Australia life not just during Glaskin's lifetime but also from our colonial days onwards.

The biography cleverly captures two elements, the authors intriguing life and the work that he created. While Glaskin would not be proclaimed a great writer, although he did appear to have a great self-belief in his writing. The wide range of topics he covered in his works paints an effective portrait of the big issues that Australian society tackled in his lifetime. His books focussed on themes as diverse as homosexuality, Asia, youth suicide and the outback.

Alongside the author's work the biography also captures the life of Glaskin. The author was born in Perth and grew up in Cottesloe, a suburb that he would constantly return to throughout his life. At a time when Perth was an extremely remote and conservative society Glaskin has several sojourns overseas to different cities and different cultures.

In his 20's Glaskin lived in Singapore making a fortune as a stock broker. Later in life he spent time living in Amsterdam where he met his long-time partner Leo van de Pas. Undoubtedly the time Glaskin spent overseas had a major effect on his view of Western Australian society and its conservative attitudes.

Burbidge's detailed biography is an intriguing read for anyone who wants to gain a good sense of what Western Australian life was like in many decades gone by, but also an insightful view into queer life in Perth prior to the decriminalisation of homosexuality. It is also a fascinating look into the processes and choices an artist makes in creating their work.

Biographer John Burbidge has had a long journey in creating this account of Glaskin's life and work. The US based author shares that he stumbled across Glaskin's work when he found a copy of the book 'No End to the Way'. Intrigued that the book was about his own home city, Perth – Burbidge was eager to find out more about Neville Jackson and soon uncovered its author and the nineteen other books he wrote.

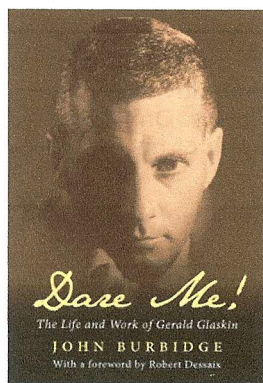
When Burbidge attempted to track Glaskin down on a trip home to Perth in 2000, he searched through the phone book and found the number for G.M Glaskin.

"I made a call on a Sunday morning and there was this strange Dutch accent on the other end of the line and he said to be 'Well I'm sorry, but Gerry died six months ago,'" explains Burbidge. The author spoke to Glaskin's long-time partner Leo van de Pas who invited him over to chat about the late author.

"Five hours later I walked out of Leo's apartment and my head was just spinning," Burbidge said, "All these stories he had told me about this amazing man and his writing. I was left with the question of 'What I was going to do about it?'"

Burbidge shares that he couldn't leave it there he had to know what motivated Gerald Glaskin, "I needed to know more, I needed to know what made this man tick. A man who wrote a landmark gay novel in the 1960s."

Burbidge's commitment to researching his subject's life is admirable. In talking to Glaskin's relatives, friends, and professional colleagues he paints a detailed and enthralling portrait. Burbidge shows us that Gerald Glaskin could be inspiring, provocative, grouchy, meddlesome, caring and frustrated. His positive and negative quality are given equal standing, but through it all this tribute to the author leaves us with admiration for his tenacity, creativity and perseverance to his craft.



'Dare Me: The Life and Work of Gerald Glaskin' by John Burbidge is available now through [Monash University Publishing](#).

YOU'RE READING

Kim McDonald, of Safety Bay, is reading
Dare Me! The Life and Work of Gerald Glaskin
by John Burbidge

Perth-born Burbidge embarked on a labour of love in writing this biography of Glaskin, another local author. Glaskin published 20 major works and was a regular contributor of letters to *The West Australian*. He also was one of the first noted authors to challenge readers to examine their attitudes to Aboriginal people. Burbidge explores Glaskin's work and life in meticulous detail, including his unabashed writings about homosexual relationships. As Burbidge writes: "I encountered a writer who was as bold in his choice of subject matter as he was in his writing style; and secondly, I discovered a person grander than I ever imagined, charming, beautiful, articulate, gifted, sensitive and funny, often angry and stoically tenacious."



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