



HHR Writing Competition 2014

An exciting announcement was made at the birthday celebrations—the Society will hold its second writing competition in honour of HHR in 2014. We are very pleased to announce that the judge will again be the award-winning fiction and nonfiction writer, Helen Garner.*

First prize is \$1500, Second \$500, Third \$250.

Text Publishing is also offering generous support again in the form of \$750 worth of books for prizes.

The competition closes on July 31. Results will be announced at a prize giving ceremony at the Wheeler Centre later in the year. Clive Probyn, President of the Society and world expert on HHR will deliver an oration.

Further information plus the guidelines and entry form for the competition will be available on the website or by mail from Graeme Charles at P.O. Box 35, Chiltern 3683.

Can you help?

Members are encouraged to enter the competition and to promote and publicise it. We also need sponsors/contributions to cover the cost of the prizes, administration and judging. Two members have already made substantial financial donations to get us on our way.



Helen Garner with 2012 winner, Bronwyn Minifie

*Helen Garner's non-fiction book published by Text is coming out in September this year. The book covers the case of Robert Farquharson, twice convicted of murder for driving his car into a dam with his three sons inside.

Birthday Celebrations 2014

Welcome from Rex Fuge

Rex Fuge, chairperson of the Chiltern Athenaeum Trust and Museum and past President of the HHR Society, welcomed a happy crowd of over 120 to the annual celebration and picnic tea at Lake View. This was the 44th year and the 44th gathering since the house that was Richardson's childhood home for a short but memorable time was opened to the public in 1970.

In Richardson's time there, 1876-7 (she was born in 1870), her father's health deteriorated and his medical practice failed. The letters Richardson's parents wrote to each other during this time and earlier times would later inspire Richardson in the writing of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*.



Rex Fuge

Rex welcomed our new patron, renowned film director, Bruce Beresford. He thanked Beryl Pickering and her band of volunteers from the Ladies North-Eastern Auxiliary for the continuing maintenance of Lake View. He also thanked Anne Vyner for her work in the garden, Mary Fuge for the making of the birthday cake for so many years, Judy Dixon for all her assistance, Erica Hansen for the flowers and Kelvin Duke for providing the sound equipment.

Clive Probyn, President of the HHR Society, endorsed Rex's thanks to Ladies N-E Auxiliary and noted the lack of assistance from the Head Office of the National Trust.

Rex gave a brief history of Lake View before the Richardsons lived there. The house was built by Mary Hancock, wife of the local draper. To finance the house she borrowed £500 from the Melbourne Building Society. She died in 1875, following the birth of her son, George.

Clive Probyn introduces Bruce Beresford

Clive thanked Bruce for graciously agreeing to be our patron after the death of Dame Elizabeth Murdoch, and welcomed him to our celebration.

Bruce has directed 31 films and is currently working in the USA on *Bonnie and Clyde* as a television film. He is a Sydney man, educated at Sydney University. He has worked on a range of films, including *The Getting of Wisdom*. This film came out in 1977, part of the first wave of work from new Australian film makers. Bruce hasn't let up since then, in both film and opera.

Clive hopes Bruce will eventually make a film version of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*.



Bruce Beresford delivers the oration 2014

Bruce Beresford

Bruce has long been interested in Richardson's work after reading *The Getting of Wisdom* at the age of twelve, followed by *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Over the years he has read all of Richardson's work and enjoyed all of it except *The Young Cosima*.

The Getting of Wisdom was his fourth film, after the two Barry McKenzie films and *Don's Party*. The Australian Film Commission was initially concerned that such a larrikan director as Bruce might not be suitable to make this film. Eleanor Whitcomb was contracted to write the screenplay and produced 170 pages, largely focussing on the teachers at the school Laura attended in the novel. Bruce wanted about 90 pages. He set to work on the script, drawing on Richardson's memoir, *Myself When Young* as well as the novel. He visited several girls' schools in Melbourne in search of the character to play Laura. He offered the girls the chance to audition. He was looking for someone who looked right and played the piano. He eventually found Susannah Fowles.

For many years Bruce has attempted to get finance for the making of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. He sees the great strength of the work in its sad ending. As early as the 1930s MGM showed interest in making the film, but it has not yet happened. (You can read an account of Bruce's attempts in the next article by Graeme Charles – 'True Stories from a life in the Screen trade'.)

When asked about the characteristics of a good film Bruce replied that it should have a story to tell and a mood to express. *Richard Mahony* has both.

We were privileged to have Bruce introducing the screenings of *The Getting of Wisdom* on Friday night and *Breaker Morant* and *Mao's Last Dancer* on Saturday in the lovely old Star theatre in Chiltern. Bruce was generous and

open in his response to questions both after the oration and the film screenings and throughout the two days he spent in Chiltern. Thanks to Rhonda and Charlie Summerfield for so generously hosting the event and turning over the Star to the Society.

What an amazing time we all had!

Cutting of cake

As always Mary Fuge kindly provided an iced fruit cake to accompany the traditional vase of red roses on the table. Richardson always liked to have a vase of roses on her working desk.

We sang happy birthday, the cake was cut, and then we enjoyed a picnic tea in the balmy gardens of Lake View before going back to the town for the screening of *The Getting of Wisdom*.



Bruce Beresford cutting the cake at Lake View

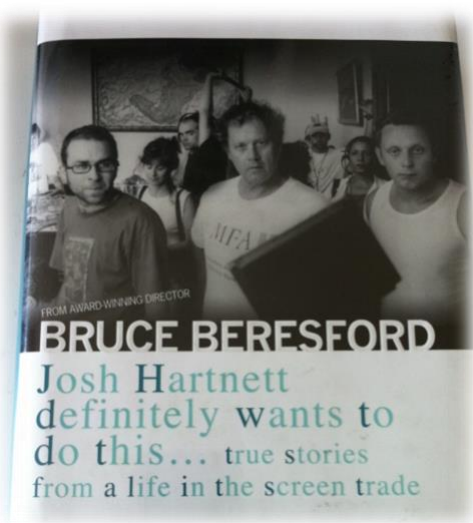
True stories from a life in the screen trade – Graeme Charles on Bruce Beresford's book

When our patron, Bruce Beresford, delivered the Society's annual oration at Lake View on January 3 he mentioned his long-held interest in filming *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Sadly, it seems highly unlikely that this will ever happen, despite Bruce's determination and resolve.

Between October 2003 and July 2005 as Bruce juggled various projects, he kept a diary of his various activities, one of which was his attempt to turn his ambition to film *The Fortunes* into reality. These diary entries formed the basis for Bruce's subsequent book - *Josh Hartnett definitely wants to do this.....true stories from a life in the screen trade* - published by Fourth Estate/Harper Collins, Sydney, 2007 (ISBN 13:978 0 7322 8439 8). For anyone with an interest in the film world, Bruce's book makes for an

extremely interesting read and I would certainly recommend it.

Here then are extracts, specifically pertaining to *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, taken from Bruce's book. Bruce has kindly agreed for these to be published in our newsletter.



Introduction (2003)

I had no other work lined up as I'd abandoned everything for *Miss Potter*, which would have taken me a year or so to complete*. I realised I would now have to resurrect some dormant projects and /or find new ones, or both. Also, it seemed I would now have time to write the script I'd been commissioned to do (at an excessively modest fee) – an adaptation of Henry Handel Richardson's three-volume novel, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*.

(*Bruce had been obsessed with filming *Miss Potter*, a story about Beatrix Potter, and wanted Cate Blanchett to play *Miss Potter*, but circumstances eventually prevailed against him.)

25th October 2003

"Came home and continued working on script of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Very difficult to adapt as the novel, probably longer than *Gone With the Wind* or *War and Peace*, rambles quite a lot. I'm sure I'm one of the very few people who has read the whole thing, at least since it was published around 1930. Atmospheric and undeniably powerful, and a well-observed main character (a portrait of Richardson's father), Richard Mahony has very little plot but numerous irrelevancies and loads of unnecessary characters. She (Ethel Richardson wrote under the name Henry Handel Richardson) really needed a good editor, as she often drops characters then invents new ones who perform the same function. Why not keep the original characters and provide more continuity? It must be at least partially because the three volumes were published separately with some years between them. The first two sold so badly that Richardson was forced to publish the concluding volume herself. Luckily, it was then combined with the first two and became a bestseller through the 1930's. The third volume, Mahony on the downhill track to insanity, is the most gripping, probably because Richardson, as a child, was able to observe her father's decline. I know this gloomy ending is going to be a problem with backers.

Tragic endings often work superbly (tragedy often has an exhilarating quality) – virtually all operas end with lovers separated or dead – but film financiers want the conventional happy fade out. Amazing that *Gone With the Wind*, still the biggest moneymaker ever, has an ending where the hero walks away from the heroine."

26th October 2003

"Tried to find if there are other scripts of *Richard Mahony*. In the 1930's when the novel was a huge success, MGM announced more than once that they were filming it. Presumably someone wrote a screenplay? Very hard to track it down now but I want to be prepared if someone springs up and claims authorship of the screenplay.

I remember too, that John Morris wanted to make *Richard Mahony* when he ran the South Australian Film Corporation in the 1970's. That came to nothing and I don't think he had a script written. Later, Dino De Laurentis talked about doing it, but again, no script was commissioned. I think he looked at the 1000 page book and considered it too formidable.

There has been a radio adaptation, I'm told, and a stage play. I've not seen or read either. It would make a great opera. It has all the ingredients – a great love story, superb roles for tenor, baritone and soprano and a de rigueur tragic ending."

2nd December 2003

"Back in Sydney. Still working on the adaptation of *Richard Mahony*. Sent pages to Oscar Whitbread and Zelda Rosenbaum, the producers in Melbourne."

15th December 2003

"Trying to do five pages a day on the *Richard Mahony* script. Unless I work to a schedule the job will never get done. I know I drive my wife crazy by playing classical music at a high volume as I write."

7th January 2004

"Meeting with Peter Rose at Showtime re *Fortunes of Richard Mahony* and *The Women in Black*. Both had been recommended to him but he hadn't read either. Seemed to indicate he'd put \$500,000 into WIB and is interested in the other for a TV mini-series. Surprised me by telling me he 'never reads scripts'. Evidently, he relies on the advice of others."

19th January 2004

"So many projects. All fanciful? Will any of them happen?"

Fortunes of Richard Mahony: TV should be interested in this one, but no guarantee they will be. Despite its flaws, this is one of the great Australian novels and would make an epic movie."

13th February 2004

"Sue Milliken has heard Showtime Australia are sending a script assessment of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. This will almost certainly be hostile. In my experience these things usually are, possibly because the assessors feel they're only really doing their job if they point out numerous infelicities."

14th February 2004

"As I predicted, the assessment on *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* was so dismissive of the script it's hard to believe

Showtime could want to go ahead with the project. If they do they would have no faith in the assessor at all; in which case why bother using him/her? I think I can put a line through this one.”

15th February 2004

“Wrote a lengthy answer to the script assessor’s comments on *Richard Mahony*, though I know it’s a waste of time. I’m very wary of getting involved in this project if the producers want some script other than the one they have. Who writes these script assessments? They’re never signed. At least not the ones I’ve been given over the years.”

1st June 2004

“Finished turning the *Richard Mahony* film script into a mini-series. Added 50 pages. Be interesting to see what they think of this. Certainly odd to make a drama which has such a down-beat ending – but that’s the story. And the third volume of the novel, the one with Mahony’s death, is the best. The description of Mahony’s descent into madness, his collapse and death is written with the intensity of Dostoevsky.”

4th June 2004

“Delivered *Fortunes of Richard Mahony* in four one-hour episodes. Sue, Zelda and Oscar seem to like it. Not sure where we go from here.”

24th June 2004

“Showtime have been in touch and don’t want to proceed with *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. I predicted this when I read their damning script assessment months ago. I could be wrong, but still think the script is quite good. Zelda and co are sending it off to the BBC and a few other places.”

16th August 2004

“Heard from Zelda Rosenbaum that Icon (Mel Gibson’s company) and the BBC also don’t like my *Richard Mahony* script. I still think it’s good despite the now almost universal rejection. Logically, I know I have to be wrong about this, though just about everyone assured me the scripts of *Tender Mercies* and *Driving Miss Daisy* were worthless. Of course I didn’t write those so could have been more objective.”

19th August 2004

“After lunch (with steadicam operator Simon Harding) I went to Channel 9 to meet with Posie Graeme-Evans re *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* as a TV mini-series. She is in charge of production. Along with Oscar Whitbread and Zelda Rosenbaum, I’m ushered into an office. We wait a few minutes for Posie, who is a bouncy and self-confident middle-aged lady. Despite her cheerfulness there is an effortless air of authority. When she speaks, or it seems she is about to speak, her assistants fall silent and wait expectantly for the pronouncement. She tells us she quite likes the script (then immediately drags up the old Hollywood chestnut of the rewrite), but is worried about her Channel 9 audience who ‘live in Rooty Hill and don’t read the SMH’. It always worries me when producers, or any creative people, express such views about audiences. I’ve never believed they (audiences) were particularly stupid. I’ve had numerous test screenings in America and have invariably been impressed by many of the comments made by the ‘focus group’ – usually around 20 people who are

chosen at random and then kept after the screening to discuss the film in some detail.

Further, Australian TV stations are producing very little local drama. They prefer those interminable and interminably boring ‘reality’ shows where the camera eavesdrops on a bunch of masochists being forced to live together. These things cost nothing to produce.

I comment on some rather lurid posters on the wall. It turns out that Posie is also a novelist of some note and these are her most recent works – *The Innocent* and *The Exiled*. I am given a copy of each.”

20th August 2004

“With a feeling of dread I read one of Posie’s books. It is one of the bodice rippers I expected from the posters. I don’t want to sound like a snob, although I do, but it seems inconceivable to me that someone who writes this kind of thing is going to respond to *Richard Mahony*.”

12th October 2004

“Met Sue Milliken and Oscar Whitbread re *Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Posie, at Channel 9, wants a ‘rewrite to make it more ‘commercial’. Problem is, the things she asks for in the notes seem to me to be already there. I’ve suggested she have it rewritten to her specifications and I’ll look at it.”

Epilogue (written post-11th July 2005)

“And all those other projects?and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* are all inching forward, or perhaps backward, in the search for finance and a cast.”

Graeme Charles

Welcome to new members

Elaine Price

Patti Smith

Ruth Crockford

Pam Wells

Marie O’Hare

Alison Grant

Reminder re subscriptions

At the AGM held on 3 January 2014 it was resolved to keep our annual membership subscription at \$15 per individual. If you haven’t already done so, you can send your 2014 membership sub to the Society at PO Box 35 Chiltern 3683 or direct deposit into our account ‘Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia’ BSB 803 070 Account no. 77605, making sure your name is shown.

HHRSA Committee

President: Clive Probyn

Vice-President: Graeme Charles

Secretary: Janey Runci

Treasurer: Dot Charles

Committee Members:

Helen McBurney

Bronwyn Minifie

Website: www.henryhandelrichardsonociety.org.au