

Perspectives

A large concrete arch bridge spans a valley. The bridge has multiple arches and a metal guardrail. In the background, there are green hills, a forest, and a blue sky with clouds. A few vehicles are visible on the bridge.

Year 9
2006

UNEARTH FACTS TO BUILD A STORY THAT WILL LAST

When you dig beneath the surface, there's lots of interesting things to write about, says Robyn Annear.



In Melbourne 40 years ago, wherever you looked this sign would meet your eye.

And behind every sign was a building in the process of being knocked down by Whelan the Wrecker.

Whelan the Wrecker wasn't just one man, but a demolition business run by the Whelan family. Old Jim Whelan started wrecking in 1892. When he died his three sons took over, followed by their sons, and so on for 100 years.

During the 1960s and '70s whole city blocks in Melbourne were cleared to make way for massive new skyscrapers. People were dazzled at first by the "glass houses", but pretty soon they began thinking about – and fighting to save – the historic buildings that were being lost.

You could possibly think of the Whelans as vandals who destroyed the city's history. But I never saw them that way. To me, as a kid, the Whelans seemed like treasure-hunters or archaeologists, uncovering history. They were always in the news, showing off their latest discoveries: all kinds of weird relics found inside and under the buildings they wrecked. And after they'd pulled a building down, they sold the wreckage at their scrapyards in Brunswick – everything from old bricks and toilets to marble statues and staircases. I loved the idea of turning something as ordinary as a building into all that interesting and useful stuff.

In their 100 years, the Whelans wrecked thousands of buildings, from humble houses to grand city landmarks. Just imagine all the stuff they must have found in that time. I think about it a lot right now, because I'm writing a book on Whelan the Wrecker – or rather, I'm on the brink of writing it. I've spent a year researching my subject: interviewing people, reading through old files and newspapers, poring over maps and photographs, and walking around the city, retracing the wrecker's trail. I've gathered enough material for a dozen books. But now that it comes to writing, I have to decide: which story am I going to tell?



Jaz and Gi-Gi



Jaz didn't stop reading until her eyes blurred with the effort of deciphering the tiny faded writing. Slowly she closed the covers of the old diary and retied the frayed pink tapes. In her mind she was seeing pictures conjured up by the words she'd read. High wild hills, storm-tossed seas, and a small community struggling against a tough environment and an even tougher way of life. And overriding it all, the voice of Maggie Mouat, reaching across 130-odd years. The voice of her – what – great-great-great grandmother?

'She wasn't much older than you when she wrote that,' said Gi-Gi, picking up on her thoughts. 'Just a slip of a lass.'

'Wow!' said Jaz. 'This diary is something else! I didn't know you had this, Gi-Gi.'

'I was waiting for the right time to show it to you,' said her great-grandmother. 'It's many years since I last looked at it. She gave it to me herself, you know. When I was about your age.'

'Awesome,' said Jaz. 'Did you know her well? What was she like?'

‘She was quite an old lady by then, of course,’ said Gi-Gi. ‘Or so it seemed at the time.’ She chuckled ruefully. ‘Now I come to work it out, she wouldn’t have been quite seventy.’

‘Compared to you, a mere chicken, then,’ said Jaz, grinning.

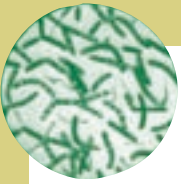
Gi-Gi shook her head in mock severity. ‘Back then, we treated our elders with great respect. Not that you would know the meaning of the word.’

‘You wouldn’t have it any other way,’ said Jaz. ‘Tell me more about her – what was she like?’

‘We used to be rather frightened of her. Grandma always dressed in black or navy. Very formal, tailored costumes. Hair severely controlled in a tight bun – though it was curly, like yours. She’d been a headmistress for years. She was quite formidable.’

‘She sounds it!’ Jaz found it hard to relate this description to the Maggie Mouat of the diary.

‘Then later on, when she moved closer to be near my mother, we saw more of her.’ Her great-grandmother thought a moment. ‘If you caught her in the right mood, she would tell us the most wicked stories of her childhood in Shetland.’



Bacteria Talk

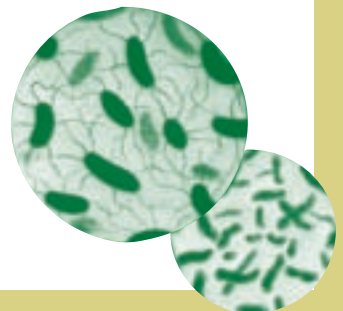
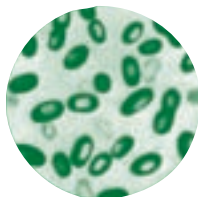
Scientists now tell us that animals communicate with each other. Back in the 1920s, Karl von Frisch claimed that bees talked with each other. It took a long time to convince other scientists, so he didn't get a Nobel Prize until 1973.

Today, some microbiologists claim that bacteria talk to each other! They say that bacteria do this via various chemicals that they give off. They say that bacteria co-operate with each other so that they can, for example, fight off antibiotics, or even find and catch food.

One way that bacteria fight antibiotics is via their cell walls. Bacteria have a tough cell wall, and it's this that many antibiotics attack. But when some bacteria live in social colonies, they no longer build a cell wall, but rely on a coating of slime to protect the colony. The antibiotics can't find a cell wall to attack, and so they can't harm the bacteria.

One way that bacteria co-operate to find food is to form themselves into a column, about 5 microns wide and 100 microns long. This column will ooze across the streets of the slime city until it comes near some food. It will then change direction towards the food, and then the column will break up into individual bacteria which will then eat their fill.

We now know that bacteria talk to each other. But the real breakthrough will come once we understand their chemical language. That will be the first giant step to a wonderful friendship between bacteria and humans.



VOLUNTEERING



To many of us, the start of another school year means the pleasure of a reunion with friends or the dread of returning to homework. To some, unfortunately not enough, it is also the start of the year's volunteer work. We often struggle to find free time, but the benefits of donating time should not be overlooked.

Time away from school work, in an activity you enjoy, gives your mind a much-needed rest and actually decreases stress and makes your study time more efficient. It is essential, though, to choose a cause you support in more than just principle. For some time I volunteered for cleaning in a nursing home. I detested the work and thus only occasionally showed up for it. It is almost impossible to motivate yourself to willingly do a job that you do not enjoy. However, if you find office administration, childcare or humanitarian relief enjoyable and fulfilling, you will doubtless be able to find a placement you can look forward to attending.

Working free-of-charge in a field you hope to be employed in is an excellent way to learn valuable job skills and helps you determine whether or not that field is for you. Volunteer experience on a job application stands out because it is hands-on, and this is helpful no matter what career you want.

So, as you attend your first lessons and plan for the upcoming weekends, consider adding a volunteer placement to your schedule. The educational and personal benefits are indisputable, and the contribution to the community will probably be at least as rewarding to you as the career-defining lessons you will certainly learn.

ONLINE FORUM: **ROAD SAFETY**



At the end of a radio program on road safety, listeners were invited to submit responses on the radio's website.

From: **Quiet One** 8/07/2005 4:57:47 PM

Reducing the speed limit will have no effect on those who drive too fast. It is a totally cynical exercise which, if it is not solely designed to increase revenue, is meant to make politicians look as if they are doing something. Much more rigorous enforcement of existing laws and limits would be far more beneficial than creating new ones.

From: **Cork** 11/07/2005 5:41:15 PM

I am not a great believer in speed limits as such, as I think that those drivers who are not "empathetic" to car control and traffic management tend to believe that the speed limit must be safe regardless of conditions. To say that speed causes accidents leaves out an important word – inappropriate! Advanced driving courses, night driving courses, skid control and so on, are essential for all drivers and not a profusion of speed cameras monitoring minor infringements in perfectly safe conditions, for revenue raising.

From: **Albert**

12/07/2005 9:39:12 PM

I live in a rural area. The speed limit on the gravel road that I travel on every day is 100 kph, which is clearly not acceptable due to the road width and condition. I am often forced to take evasive action to avoid a collision. Cars frequently spin off and go through our farm fences. I feel the speed limit for such gravel roads must be reduced to 80 kph.

From: **Mac**

13/07/2005 1:22:43 PM

Lack of driver training is the most prevalent cause of crashes. This is the root of all of the other “so called” causes. A properly trained driver does not speed or drive recklessly when conditions are poor. A properly trained driver will recognise when road or weather conditions warrant a lower speed and more concentration. I believe that all drivers should be forced to undergo re-examination on a regular basis to ensure they are competent in the manual and co-ordination skills required to drive a motor vehicle, and that they are fully up-to-date with the latest road traffic rules.





Reading

funny
how the eye
goes right
to the line
where we left off
 reading
but the brain
can't accept
how serenely
at one
with the book
we are,
 the way
hunters once knew
—just knew—
when to throw
the spear & where
exactly,
 in all
the bright world,
their next meal
was coming from.

John Forbes



The Murray

My river journey began in the late spring on top of one of Australia's higher mountains. By world standards a rather low mountain, it was high enough to be wearing a shawl of unseasonable snow. Frozen, I stood ankle-deep in the shawl's fraying hem and watched a trickle of water from its icy fringe wander down the mountain's shoulder. The Murray's enigmatic, 1700-mile trek to the sea had begun.

I won't pretend that my first glimpse of that feeble trickle affected me profoundly. What I actually thought was that, unless it quickly became navigable, I had a long walk ahead of me; that I was singularly ill-shod to walk through snow about which no one had had the courtesy to warn me; and that, despite the cold, I was thirsty. A hundred yards on, the infant Murray offered me a drink from what had already become a rill* of the sweetest water imaginable.

* rill: a stream, smaller than a creek

