



Grief, Ghosts and Giving Yourself Permission

My Spirited Stay In The Fishbowl

By Lara Cain Grey

Quiz time. Which would you choose: A room of one's own, or a room with a view? They're equally appealing to most writers – and never moreso than in the age of lockdowns and limitations. The first time I settled myself into the Queensland Writers Centre's 'Fishbowl', pulling the velvet curtain behind me and gazing out past the book stacks towards the Brisbane river, it dawned on me: I had found both! I savoured the privilege of a secluded space that required nothing of me but more words on the page, with a treasure trove of research material sitting just beyond my glass enclosure in the State Library of Queensland. If I couldn't write my novel here, I simply couldn't write my novel.

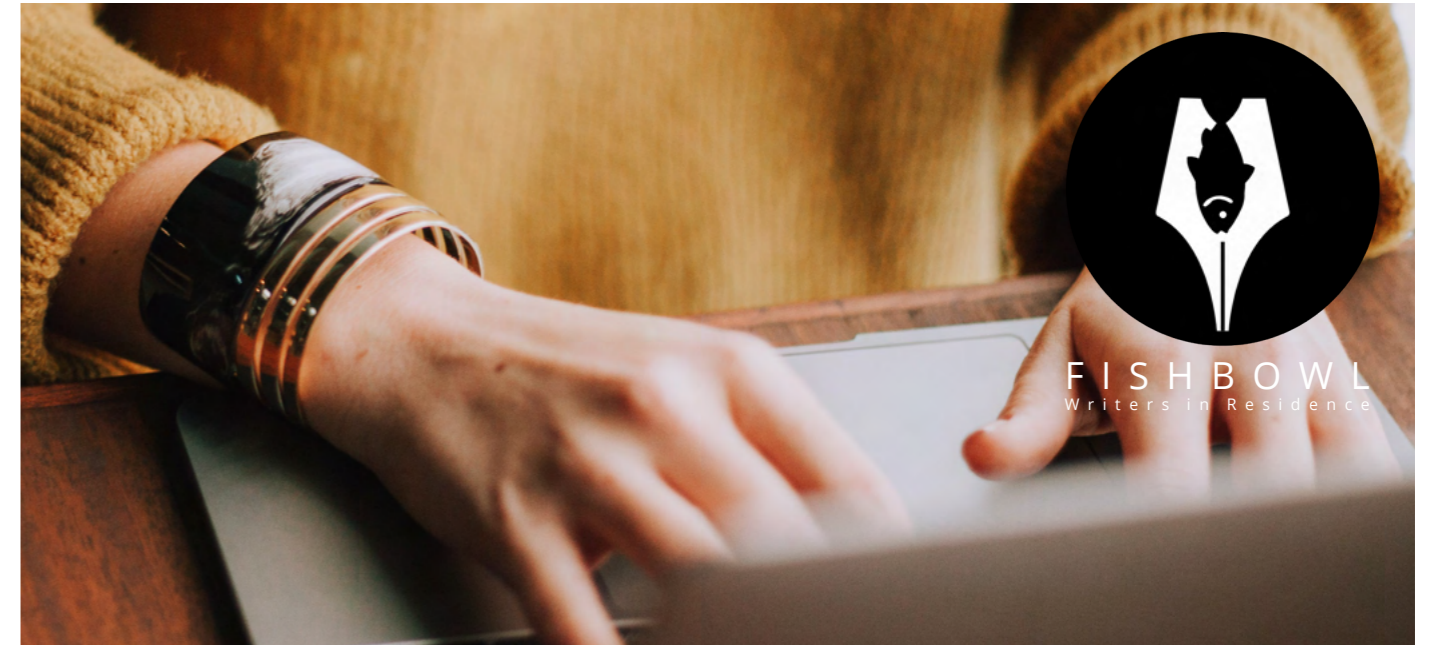
The Fishbowl Residency provides writing space and mentoring over 10 weeks to help writers achieve their creative goals. Some participants conjure a whole draft in that time; others manage to sharpen, polish, or finish a long-term project. The application process asks you to submit detailed, achievable outcomes and a practical pathway to reaching them. I'm pleased to say that I met, then surpassed, my initial aims, with some surprising twists and turns along the way.

My YA novel, *I Am Light*, is set in Brisbane in the 1920s. It examines the influence of spiritualism on a grief-stricken girl whose family is recalibrating in the wake of the First World War and the Spanish Flu. Seeking healing, she becomes obsessed with newspaper coverage of Sir Arthur

Conan Doyle's Australian speaking tour. When the famous writer, an enthusiastic spirit communicator, announces his Brisbane dates, Maggie is inspired. Could he be the one to explain why she's seeing strange shadows in the night?

The early research behind this project brought me joyful relief from all that 2020 hurled our way. Like so many others, my professional office life had become a work-from-home life, and my family's school-sport-social schedule was a sanitised shell of its former self. I committed to taking a few layers off my long term To Be Read pile, including tackling the complete *Sherlock Holmes*. This reading sent me wandering around online until pieces of a fascinating story puzzle began jumping out at me. I finally understood the curious claim writers sometimes put forward: the story found me, not the other way around. Before I knew it I'd lined up thrilling moments of data gathering, like visiting the Spiritualist Church in Spring Hill, where Sir Arthur laid a foundation stone in 1921.

I was inspired! But I was also limited. As much as I love both my family and my job, it's notoriously hard for your writing fingers to fly with everyone under your feet. But this feeling is hardly new to the Covid age. Creative souls have always struggled to carve out space without feeling selfish; without worrying that the children will be neglected, or the boss will be resentful, or the goldfish will starve. Many of us tend to put everything else before our 'frivolous' desire



to write. One key benefit of securing a residency is the sense of permission it lends to the creative process.

I applied for the Fishbowl Residency with the hope of turning my pages of scrappy notes and news clippings into a workable chapter outline. I also aimed to answer some burning research questions (how exactly did newspaper delivery work in 1921?) and get 10,000 useful words on the page. I took a week off work to kickstart the process and hit my wishful word limit in that week. Sure, many of those words were later sacrificed to the red pen, but they were no longer hiding in my head, and that was powerful.

Beyond that glorious week, I fitted my Fishbowl days around other commitments, but adding it to my diary made me accountable. The novel had become a living, breathing, WIP, no longer just a bright idea. Even if only one or two days a week could be devoted to it, it was taking shape.

With the SLQ's impressive newspaper collection at my fingertips I locked down many crucial details of my historical setting. I spent a delicious day leafing through the *E Jack Cutting Book*, for example, a carefully collated scrapbook of 1920s spiritual stories, donated by Brisbane local Eustace Jack. The further I delved into this world of mediums, fairy photos, and life after death, the more I began questioning my own beliefs. Was it merely luck that had me sitting in the Fishbowl 100 years to the day from

Sir Arthur's Brisbane sojourn?

QWC's hard working in-house editor, Sandra Makaresz, provided feedback on my chapter outline, and later some draft pages. All the while, I benefited from the friendly faces of the QWC team, who work tirelessly to connect writers with learning opportunities, industry insights, and each other. Simply being around people who care deeply about books and writing is always encouraging. Find your tribe!

So now Maggie, Arthur and I have been left to our own devices, but I feel confident we will build a strong story on such solid foundations. And whilst I no longer get to hide out in my fishy carapace, I'll be back to enjoy the view - and the company - as the novel progresses.

Dr Lara Cain Gray is specialist librarian with expertise in collection curation. Her professional past spans roles in library and museum curatorship, academic teaching, and corporate writing and editing. At present, she oversees development of cross-cultural and multilingual books with innovative Australian nonprofit publisher Library For All. She holds a PhD in cultural studies, with an emphasis on Australian literature, and participates enthusiastically in the Australian writing and reading community via her blog *Charming Language*.