

Cover
feature

L to R: Journalist Erin O'Dwyer, Professor Sue Turnbull, True Story director Caroline Baum and documentary maker Belinda Lopez. Photos: Anthony Warry



By Caroline Baum

True Story BUT SERIOUSLY

It's that time of year again!

True Story is back for its fourth year of showcasing some of Australia's best non-fiction books on the weekend of November 15 and 16, and in 2025 the theme is 'But Seriously'.

This year our festival is about discovering writers who may not be on your radar. Not every award-winner is famous, and the insatiable attention span of the media often overlooks great stories or voices.

So come along to True Story and hear someone you are unfamiliar with, or choose to go to an event on a subject you know nothing about. I've had some of my most memorable festival experiences that way and heard audiences

fizz with excitement when they realise they have unearthed fresh treasure, simply by attending a session they weren't planning on.

True Story provides a broad forum for stories that are based on facts – but those stories come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and ways of making sense of the world. You'll hear voices you can trust, writers who are not making anything up, but have a talent for telling a gripping yarn that may surprise, shock or move you.

It's been a tough year out there in the world, so come and restore your faith in humanity in the welcoming atmosphere of readers. We can't wait to see you.

TRUE
STORY.
But Seriously

WORKSHOPS

FINDING YOUR VOICE

Friday 14 November, 10am–2:30pm



Whether you're writing for online, page, stage or screen, your distinctive voice is what connects you to your audience. In this practical, inspiring workshop with journalist and narrative strategist Erin O'Dwyer, you'll learn how to uncover and refine a voice that's authentic and compelling – whether you're telling your own story or someone else's. You'll leave with refreshed confidence, and a clear sense of how to make your writing sing.

HOW TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Saturday 15 November, 9:30–11:30am



Award-winning documentary maker and writer Belinda Lopez has spent many years asking the right questions to discover untold stories about families, history and society.

In this workshop, she focuses on the art of interviewing – an often overlooked but crucial skill for writers of family and social histories, memoir and biography, as well as in documentary and journalism. She shares the approaches she has developed to unearth illuminating stories in collaboration with her interviewees.

WALKING TOUR

WICKED WOMEN OF WOLLONGONG

Saturday 15 November, 10am–12pm



Uncover Wollongong's hidden feminist history with author and tour guide Sita Sargeant (*She Shapes History*). Take a walk through the city's streets, shoreline and squares to

discover how women shaped Wollongong's politics, culture, and community life.

From ocean baths carved out by convicts so women could swim in privacy, to the grassroots campaigns that changed Australia's constitution, this tour reveals a different side of the city. Along the way you'll encounter stories of survival, protest, reinvention and creativity – from the foreshore to Market Square to the Old Courthouse.

You'll leave with a fresh perspective on Wollongong's landmarks and a deeper appreciation of the women who helped shape the city into what it is today.

TICKETS

True Story Festival is on
15 & 16 November at Coledale
Community Hall. Tickets via
Humanitix or scan the QR code



Every program is a balancing act, as artistic director Caroline Baum proves again.

Below: Dr Jodi Edwards welcomes the audience and scenes from previous festivals



True Story Festival is brought to you by
Caroline Baum, the South Coast Writers
Centre and The Illawarra Flame, with
support from Collins Booksellers Thirroul.

2025 PROGRAM

SATURDAY PROGRAM

WELCOME TO COUNTRY

Saturday 15 November, 1:15–1:30pm

Dr Jodi Edwards is a Yuin woman with Dharawal kinship connection who has dedicated her life to community, culture, education and language. She delivers the Welcome Address for this year's festival.

TRUE CRIME, LOCAL

MR WOLLONGONG

Saturday 15 November, 1:30–2:30pm



Former mayor of Wollongong Frank Arkell was flamboyant, successful, well-off and a relentless champion of the city he loved. But there was a sinister, dark underside to his

life that involved predatory sexual behaviour towards young boys as part of an alleged paedophile ring of powerful men. In his book *Politics, Pride and Perversion*, historian Erik Eklund (pictured) has done forensic research to tell a story that is disturbing and continues to divide people to this day. He tells Professor Sue Turnbull how he uncovered the secrets of Arkell's network and his brutal murder.

LOCAL, BIOGRAPHY

TRUE LOCALS

Saturday 15 November, 2:45–3:45pm



Non-fiction authors walk among us! Four local writers tell ABC Illawarra host Melinda James (pictured) about their exciting new titles. Biographer Jeff Apter reveals

the life of trailblazing music producer Lee Gordon. Journalist Erin O'Dwyer has the inside story on the true crime memoir she co-wrote with a former beauty queen and convicted drug dealer. Electrify Everything guru Saul Griffith explains how to *Plug*

In! to cut household costs and carbon emissions. And journalist Jeremy Lasek looks at the people who powered the Illawarra's Yes23 campaign.

BIOGRAPHY

FROM OCEAN TO MOUNTAIN

Saturday 15 November, 4:00–5:00pm



Two of the best new Australian biographers talk about how they bring to life remarkable lives that deserve another look. Vicki Hastrich celebrates

deep-sea fishing champion and millionaire author Zane Grey, who spent time fishing for marlin on the South Coast of NSW, while Anthony Sharwood (pictured) travels in the footsteps of his hero, Enlightenment freedom fighter Tadeusz Kościuszko – from Poland to France, from the US to our own high country – to ask how his name got given to our tallest peak. They are in conversation with Caroline Baum, host of *Life Sentences*, a podcast about contemporary biography.

FIRST NATIONS, HISTORY

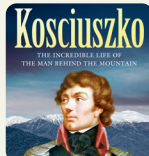
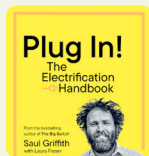
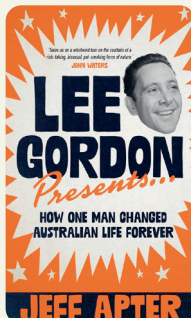
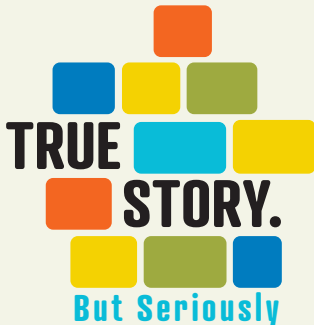
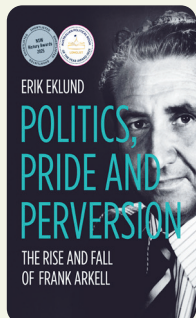
KEYNOTE: A WAY FORWARD

Saturday 15 November, 5:15–6:15pm



Stella Prize-winning historian Professor Clare Wright has long been a source of inspiring stories about our past with her award-winning accounts of the Eureka Stockade and the early Australian feminist movement,

as well as her television documentaries, radio programs, feature films and podcasts. We are honoured that this year she delivers our keynote address, which tells the story behind the *nāku dhāruk* (bark petitions) created by the Yolngu people in Arnhem Land to stake their claim to their country, thereby sparking the beginning of the land rights movement that ultimately



acknowledged legal native title. This promises to be a thought-provoking presentation that no one interested in justice and truth-telling can afford to miss. Following the address, Clare will be in conversation with Jaymee Beveridge.

SUNDAY PROGRAM

JOURNALISM, MEDIA

YOU BETTER BELIEVE IT

Sunday 16 November, 10:00–11:00am



Nothing could be more topical than conspiracy theories, as recent events such as the tragedy at Porepunkah demonstrate; and in a so-called post-truth world, what role does scepticism have in

determining who we trust and what we believe? To discuss these thorny, burning issues, we have assembled a formidable panel: Walkley award-winner Ariel Bogle and her co-writer Cam Wilson, authors of *Conspiracy Nation*, which covers everything from pandemic origin theories to school shootings; and Tracey Kirkland, editor of *Age of Doubt*, in conversation with fearless media commentator Jan Fran (pictured).

HISTORY, FEMINISM

THE REST IS HER STORY

Sunday 16 November, 11:30am–12:30pm



From monuments to documents, our history casts men as the main characters. Now two powerful storytellers are reframing the narrative to celebrate the accomplishments of women. Join Stella

Prize-winning historian Professor Clare Wright as she speaks to Yves Rees (pictured) about 10 trailblazing women whose connection with the

United States changed the course of Australian history and author Sita Sargeant, the founder of the She Shapes History walking tours, for a fresh feminist perspective on the Australian cities and towns we thought we knew.

POLITICS, HISTORY

THE F WORD

Sunday 16 November, 1:30–2:30pm



It's bandied around a lot these days in conversations about the US and right-wing politics, but what exactly is fascism and why would it prompt Wollongong steelworker Jim

McNeil to go and fight against it in the Spanish Civil War. Meanwhile, Dennis Glover (pictured) brings the subject into the modern day in his book *Repeat: A Warning from History*, drawing our attention to the perils of populists, dictators and authoritarianism. This conversation is hosted by Walkley-award winning author and podcast producer Siobhan McHugh.

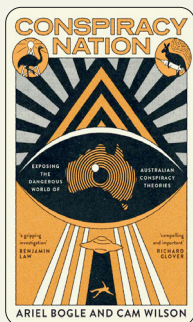
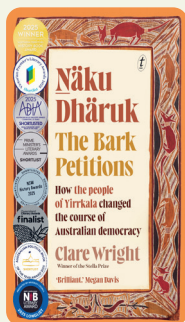
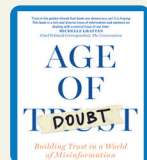
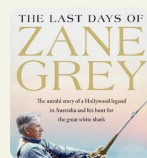
MENTAL HEALTH, MEMOIR

HEAD ON

Sunday 16 November, 2:50–3:50pm



In public, they looked poised, confident and fearless, but as high-profile social researcher Rebecca Huntley (*Sassafras*) and acclaimed musical star of *Les Mis* and *Phantom of the Opera* Josh Piterman (*Behind the Mask*) both admit, they have been haunted by trauma and anxiety. So how did they find a way to cope? They talk candidly with award-winning author and celebrant Dr Jackie Bailey (pictured). ✨



2025 PROGRAM

Accessory to memoir

By Tyneesha Williams



An award-winning journalist and editor wants Illawarra writers to “find a voice” in her True Story Festival workshop in November.

Erin O'Dwyer says she admires the efforts of the South Coast Writers Centre, Caroline Baum and other writers to foster a community where writing is valued and creativity can happen.

“Finding a voice is such a critical aspect in writing,” she says. “Either finding your voice as a writer or helping a client find theirs, or with ghostwriting, you learn how to put your client’s voice onto the page, and that’s quite an art.”

In 30 years as a journalist, Erin has seen a lot of disruption in the media industry, working for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *Good Weekend*, *The Saturday Paper*, *The Guardian*, *Australian Geographic*, *Marie Claire* and *Vogue*, and ABC Radio National. Now her broad experience helps her to write in other people’s voices.

“Journalists have found employment in ghostwriting memoirs and business books for leaders, celebrities, CEOs, founders and entrepreneurs... people who find themselves in the spotlight and might not have the story craft or time to sit down and write 75,000 words. They can turn to a professional writer to help them tell their stories,” Erin says.

In 2006, Erin’s work in the promotion of multicultural issues earned her an Australian UN Media Peace Award. She’s a two-time finalist for the same award, as well as a Walkley Award finalist.

“I have a ‘do no harm’ philosophy,” Erin says. “When I first went freelance, at about 30, that

became my ethos for jobs that I would take on, journalism that I would do, clients that I would work with. Anything I did had to have a positive social impact.

“A lot of my work has been grounded in social justice, social advocacy, social issues. And so it is very gratifying to be awarded for that kind of work because you can grind out that work, day in day out, year in year out and not get a lot of recognition or thanks.”

Through Good Prose Studios, her writing and editing consultancy business, Erin trains writers of all kinds in story strategy and narrative development. Good Prose Studios deals with any kind of written content including book-editing and corporate storytelling, and offers coaching and workshops for writers.

“We’re educating people about the core craft elements of storytelling, which we know innately, but we often miss the obvious things when we’re writing creatively,” Erin says.

Erin is a lecturer in journalism at the University of Sydney, mentoring the next generation of storytellers. “Teaching is a really valuable part of my practice as a journalist. I always find that I learn more through my teaching than maybe even the students do,” Erin says.

“We’re at a particularly interesting point in the development of news, storytelling and information ... gathering and sharing. AI and copyright are two burning issues. We’re seeing the demise of local newspapers and we’re now seeing the rise of other news sources. You can either be scared by that or you can embrace it.”

“We will always be storytellers. Human beings are hard-wired for storytelling... information gathering and sharing of news is fundamental to who we are. We just will continue to do it in different ways.”

Erin spent two years getting to know former Miss Australia, gangland girlfriend and convicted drug trafficker Felicia Djamirze, working as a ghostwriter on Felicia’s biography, *Accessory*, which was released in June. “The fact that she’s been able to turn her life around, study counselling, become a counsellor, become an advocate for women who are dealing with family violence and trauma, is a great achievement, and it was an honour to tell her story.”

Erin’s True Story workshop, *Finding Your Voice*, is on Friday, 14 November, 10am-2.30pm at Coledale Community Hall. Book via southcoastwriters.org or Humanitix 📌

Ask the right questions

By Tyneesha Williams

Award-winning documentary maker, writer and researcher Belinda Lopez will bring her expertise to True Story Festival, leading a practical workshop focused on a storyteller's most crucial skill – asking the right questions.

Belinda has spent more than 15 years telling Australian and global stories focused on human rights, social issues, and untold histories. She has worked as a writer, journalist and anthropologist, across outlets like ABC Radio National and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Her writing, podcasts and documentary collaborations received awards, including from the United Nations, Walkley Awards and the Australian Human Rights Awards.

On Saturday, 15 November, from 9:30am to 11:30am, Belinda will present a workshop titled “How to Ask the Right Questions”, focusing on the often-overlooked skill of interviewing. Belinda will share the approach she has developed to reveal impactful stories in a session for anyone interested in writing family and social histories, memoir, biography, documentary or journalism.

Her latest project is a non-fiction manuscript set in West Papua, Indonesia and Australia. “It’s been a



labour of love for many years. It's one of those stories that insists on being told, no matter the challenges,” she says.

“What drew me to the story is exactly what makes it challenging to tell: interconnecting stories over multiple languages, eras and countries, exploring truth, justice, and the mistakes we keep making, over and over again.”

To book a spot in Belinda's workshop on Saturday, 15 November, go to southcoastwriters.org or Humanitix 🌟



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