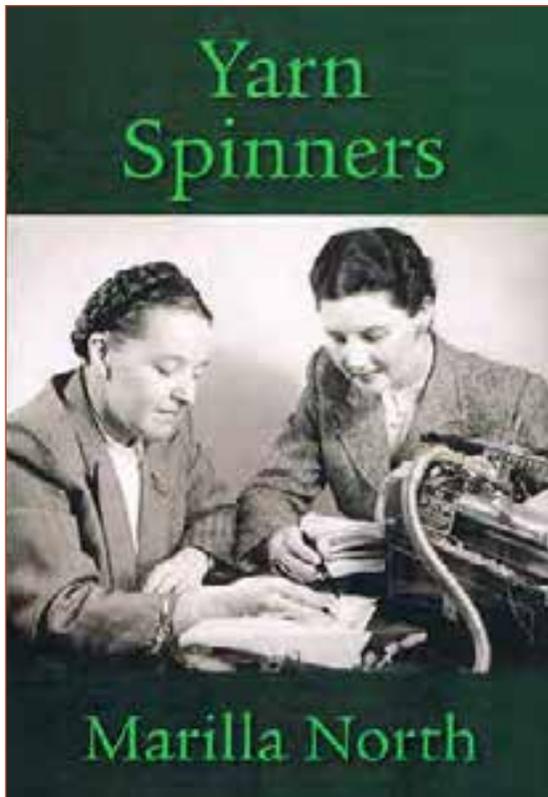


# MORE about books



## COME IN SPINNER!

We thought it was far better that we take joint responsibility for the brothel scenes and the gambling scenes... (Florence James)

*Yarn Spinners* by Marilla North  
Published by Brandl & Schlesinger 2016

*Dymphna Cusack — Lucky in Love*  
by Marilla North  
Yarnspinners Press 2017

*COME IN SPINNER* is a novel set in wartime Sydney recording the lives of three women over a period of a week. Written by Dymphna Cusack and Florence James, the book was published in 1951 in London with an initial print run of 24,000. A worldwide bestseller, it has since sold over a million copies, been translated into numerous languages, was made into an ABC TV mini-series and has never been out-of-print.

The story of how *Come in Spinner* was written and eventually published is a novel in itself – how the two writers collaborated on the book which was regarded as obscene by many at the time for its tales of rape, abortion and corruption and was only eventually published in its complete form two decades later. The tale of *Come in Spinner* weaves through Marilla North's newly revised edition of *Yarn Spinners*, published by Brandl & Schlesinger in 2016. It is followed this year by the second volume in what North plans as a trilogy, a slim book containing Dymphna's poetry and a play *We've Been So Lucky, Fella!*, entitled *Dymphna Cusack — Lucky in Love*. The play has been written by Marilla North and is a memoir. It takes the form of a dialogue between Dymphna and her beloved Norman Freehill.

*Yarn Spinners* is the hefty compilation (566 pages) of the (originally academic) research which North has carried out for several decades and continues to review and add to and which she describes as narrative biography. The tale of *Come in Spinner* is the golden thread which runs through a vast quantity of secondary and marginally related material which means that this is probably not going to be a book which one would sit down with for a good read. In addition to students of Australian literature, the book will be enjoyed by those who may have been close to the action, who have worked for the Daily Telegraph and Consolidated Press in Sydney, or lived in the Blue Mountains or even perhaps in the same streets of London where Dymphna lived – and so are familiar with the names and the places and in about the years covered here. But the majority of general readers would benefit from a very much condensed version of *Yarn Spinners* and for me that would be the story of *Come in Spinner*.

Dymphna Cusack and Florence James were exactly the same age, both born in September 1902. They met at university and remained life-long friends. Because Dymphna Cusack's preoccupations are so fully and colourfully described in correspondence with her

older friend and mentor Miles Franklin (20 years older than Dymphna and the famous author at a very early ('prodigiously precocious') age of *My Brilliant Career*), we have three main characters in *Yarn Spinners* — Florence, Dymphna and Miles with the latter two predominant. *Yarn Spinners* ends in 1954 with the death of Miles.

It is Dymphna Cusack who is the star of the show and it is she who Marilla North has so clearly fallen in love with. Dymphna, also called Nell, began writing plays while still at school and would become a prolific and internationally famous writer. She suffered throughout her life from multiple sclerosis with frequent attacks laying her low and making it impossible for her even to type her manuscripts. This terrible and debilitating disease weaves through her story like a shadowy stalker.

The letters between close friends are revelatory, detailing the vicissitudes of the writers, the anxieties, the excitement of success and the struggle always to achieve publication. There is much to be learned here for all aspiring writers — in addition to hard work, it is a lottery and success can sometimes be laced with bitterness and disappointment. There was discussion about how to write and Dymphna's letter to her future collaborator Florence is revealing: 'I feel that I can write better plays than novels... but somehow it's easier to depict characters through dialogue than any other way, at least I find it so. I read Elizabeth Jenkins' *Virginia Water* (1929) last week and I've been trying to find out just how she draws the characters. It's certainly not through dialogue or through actual description. Something of the Virginia Woolf touch about her, though she can crystallise a character more than Virginia and give their emotions more vividly. Katherine Mansfield puzzles me too. She draws a character so vividly without any apparent lines — just through a series of minute and apparently trivial pictures. How do they do it? Oh well, I shall never be bored, for all my life I shall spend trying to find out.'

Florence James would marry Pym Heyting, later Squadron Leader Pym Heyting. She had returned to Australia from England with their two young daughters in 1938 and at the outbreak of war Pym had immediately joined the RAAF and was based in the UK. Florence's letters to her husband (described by North as 'a clutch of brittle, yellowing aerograms') describe the days leading to Florence's and Dymphna's move to 'a sunlit island in time', Pinegrove at Hazelbrook in the Blue Mountains where they would live in the latter years of the war and collaborate on *Come in Spinner*.

In September 1945 Florence wrote to Pym: 'We are working together at a novel on a very much larger canvas than either of us would tackle singly. The background is a cross-section of Sydney in war-time during the US

invasion and will, we hope, stand as a faithful record of that period. We are working at pressure so that we shall be far enough advanced each to carry on our own part of the job if an opportunity should suddenly arise of my leaving for England. If the book turns out as we hope, I shall probably bring it over with me and try for English publication. There is no real money in Australian publication of serious work.'

Many years later North would interview Florence and learn how they planned the book.

Florence: 'We chose the place first, a beauty salon where we could have women revealing themselves to each other, as we wanted to get at the truth... We tried to weave together the social expectations and what women were really like. The liquor trade, the pub background and the lead up to the RSLs after the war — well, Caddie gave us quite a bit of this. I think we've got a very good bar scene in *Spinner* thanks to Caddie. We picked everybody's brains. Frank Walford, the Blue Mountains Mayor, taught us how to play two-up... He helped us with the Council typist and Dictaphone transcriptions. So we just began and the stories grew.

'Once we'd worked out the pattern of the book, we put up a large peg-board in the hallway between our two rooms and pinned up charts of the story development covering the eight day time-span of the novel. Then we worked out the background information, such as each day's weather and how the characters looked, what they wore... magazine illustrations were a great help. War news from overseas and at home was carefully charted and our notes on the local Sydney scenes almost constituted a travel guide. This peg-board was the reference life-line of the collaboration and it was compiled and then altered time and again with much excitement and discussion and a lot of laughter. We had two important watch-words: 'Spot the phoney', that is, dialogue or action out of character, and 'Watch the texture', that is work in cross references.

'We said we wouldn't say who wrote each character, but Dymphna broke it time and again. We thought it was far better that we take joint responsibility for the brothel scenes and the gambling scenes and so on. We were going to be called 'scarlet women'. So I'd say: 'Anything that a faithful wife and mother working hard during war time shouldn't know, quite obviously I didn't write.' And Dymphna would say: 'Anything that a hard-working school teacher in country schools wouldn't know about, quite obviously I didn't write.'

'Guinea Malone, the heroine, a gorgeous girl with her Irish-Catholic working-class background and sense of humour, Dymphna knew; and Deb and her background

came from some experience of our family. I was a much more staid girl from the Presbyterian Ladies College. I didn't have the Irish touch... I give her that every time.

'We had an enormous amount of flashbacks. It took us two and a half years to write. We followed a story through. We didn't write by each exclusively developing one character's story. If one of us had an inspiration about it then she'd do that bit of the writing. Then everything had to be interwoven...'

In March 1946 Dymphna wrote to Miles: 'All is well and we are launched on the last section of the Magnum Opus which SHALL be finished by Easter.'

Rivalry between the Sydney Morning Herald and the Daily Telegraph (Consolidated Press) had led in 1946 to both offering prizes in book competitions, first prizes of £2,000 from the SMH and £1,000 from the DT. For complex reasons which are described, the two women decide to submit *Come in Spinner* to the DT competition incognito and with another title, *Unabated Spring* by Sydney Wyborne. They also send the manuscript to Miles for her comments and in fact the final publication is dedicated to Miles.

Even after submitting the manuscript to the DT, the women continue to revise based on the feedback of their various readers and anticipating the criticism of the DT judges.

In March 1947 Florence tells Miles that 'by the end of next week (their revision) should be finished and 50,000 words given over to the scrap heap. No pearls in the junk I hasten to assure you, only tedious recapitulation...'

The following events are almost slapstick. A month later they learn that the judging of the competition 'is now in its final stages and the result should be known in a few weeks'. 'Your MS is among the seven final novels from which the winning one will be selected. Every novel has been carefully read. The final seven by each of the six judges in the different states... hence the delay in announcing the result.'

The DT refuse to discuss the competition with any intermediaries, only 'Sydney Wyborne' himself, and there is a very funny exchange related by Dymphna (September 1947) where she dresses smartly and goes to meet Brian Penton at the DT and reveals herself as Sydney Wyborne – or at least part of Sydney Wyborne, with Florence James.

She learns that there were 380 entries and is asked if she would be prepared to make various cuts, something

they had already anticipated. But still the final winner had not been announced. Dymphna relates how Brian Penton wanted to know if they would be prepared to cut the MS by 60-70,000 words and 'brought up all points re language and situations we had already anticipated... and was overwhelmed with joy when I said there was already a second draft...'. Also, 'problem of how to overcome Hotel Australia suing us for libel is racking their brains. I said we'd co-operate to hilt on all points except fact – unless fact was obscene or libellous. Then he read me the judges' reports... All made same criticisms re overlong, repetition in dialogue (???)... Words like 'vital, vigorous, masculine' (!!!) abounded. 'Best work here in last 10 years', someone else said. 'Salty humour', 'astringent satire', 'powerful drama'. Guinea is general favourite. But still no final announcement of the winner.

Three weeks later Dymphna laments 'NO NEWS OF SPINNER. God Rot the DT and Brian Penton!... Editorial constipation gets wusser and wusser...'

It is not until 3 May 1948 that *Come in Spinner* is finally awarded the DT prize.

Over a year later, in July 1949, Florence who has gone to live in London writes to the DT concerning their continuing delay in actually publishing the book:  
MS submitted to DT competition October 1946  
Prize awarded May 1948  
MS sent to me for alteration December 1948  
MS returned by me ready for publication February 1949  
MS still on your office desk at date of writing July 1949'

In the end the women take *Come in Spinner* from the DT and it is first published in 1951 in the UK by William Heinemann.

And what about the £2,000 SMH prize?  
In October 1949, Miles writes to Dymphna:  
'Herald prizes announced this morning. Judges unable to award first prize for either novel or short story. None of more than 200 novels was deserving of the £2,000. Second Prize £1,000 TAG Hungerford of Canberra for *Sowers of the Wind*. Third of £500 goes to D'Arcy Niland for *Gold in the Streets*. ...  
Gosh! Is all I can say' ...

'I think there is something craven as well as skunkish about the Consolidated boggling over *Spinner* ... I hope you have a better kind of success with it abroad.'

In November 1949, Dymphna writes to Miles:  
'No news of Consolidated... I feel that the Fellowship (of Australian Writers) should start demanding an inquiry into the whole of the competition. We're safe

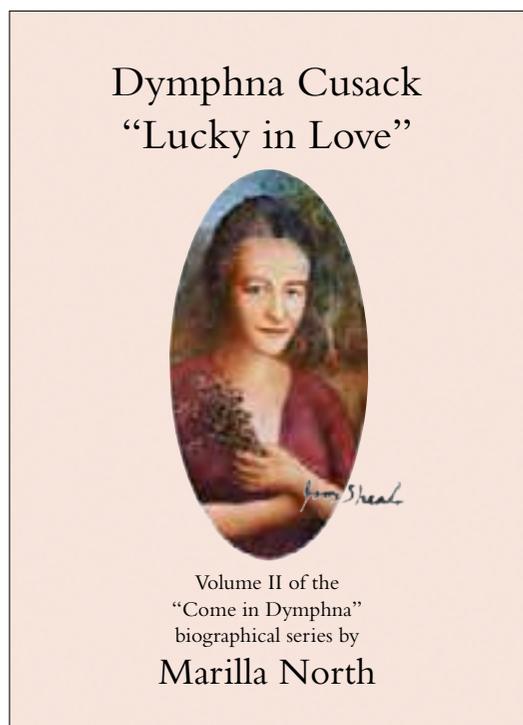
out of it, but they have an obligation which they have never fulfilled to the rest of the writers ... I can't believe we finally won – even if a Pyrrhic victory.'

Then Miles to Dymphna in February 1950: ...'Beatrice Davis agrees that the DT should be gone for in regard to the competition. Her remark was that 'they had hoaxed the authors and the public'...'

*Yarn Spinners* is a revelatory story of writers, competitions and publishing and fascinating to read. So many experiences: *Come in Spinner* is edited by an Englishman at Heinemann who 'corrects' the slang, it is badly translated in another case, it is poorly adapted without Dymphna's and Florence's consent for an Australian radio series where it is pulled after the second instalment because of listeners' complaints... Nevertheless and in spite of everything *Come in Spinner* is a worldwide bestseller and continues in print till today.

*LUCKY IN LOVE* was published this year as volume II of the *Come in Dymphna* biographical series by Marilla North. Artist Garry Shead's portrait of Dymphna graces the cover. He says: 'The more I worked on Dymphna Cusack's portrait, the more of her works I read, the more fascinating I found her life and Marilla's wonderful re-creation of that life in the chemistry of her friends, her lovers and her passionate commitment to social justice, human rights and individual freedom that drove her to write her great stories of ordinary people's lives.'

Carolynne Skinner



From Dymphna Cusack 'Lucky in Love'

## I TROD THE WILDERNESS ALONE

I trod the wilderness alone  
As the parched earth crumbled underneath my feet,  
A dull echo died in her barren womb.  
I walked in shadow,  
No springs gushed.  
The rivers were all stilled,  
Shrunk to a ghost of rippled sand  
Where once cool waters ran.  
A dark world was my tomb.  
These cerements of sentient flesh,  
This exquisite casket built of bone  
Shut in my spirit, lost and dark,  
Earth's echoes died within my uncreating heart  
Each pulse a threnody of doom.  
You came—earth shuddered into life again,  
And springs broke from its availed womb.  
The rivers moved full-tided to the sea,  
New springing life set all the wilderness aflame  
And at your touch my flesh was living fire.  
My blood ran surging full within my veins  
Full-tided from my wakened heart,  
I walked in light—  
The shining world was mine.

Previously unpublished

Handwritten on the back of this poem dated  
17 May 1941, Kings Cross:

Monday morning. I was awakened at quarter to two this morning as though in answer to a call from you. So real was it that I turned blindly to you to comfort you with my lips and my breasts — and to be comforted. I lay awake for a long time in a state of terrible tension with my heart hammering — went out on the terrace and saw Aquila flying up his eastern sky and then I went back to bed, but not to sleep. I am staying here all tomorrow on strike! Blast the flats and the landlord. I am sitting in my sunsuit and the sea is blue and silver.

Written for Xavier Herbert, Dymphna's lover between 1939 and 1941.