



FROM LEFT Holidaying at Caloundra Beach; a three-year-old Robyn at Stanley Park; Robyn joined by her cousins at the beach.

ROBYN DAVIDSON

WRITER, EXPLORER AND FILMMAKER

THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *TRACKS* TELLS CLAIRE MACTAGGART ABOUT HER COLOURFUL CHILDHOOD SPENT ON A GRAZING PROPERTY.

AS A CHILD GROWING UP on a sheep property at Mooloolah in the lush Sunshine Coast hinterland, Robyn Davidson nurtured some big dreams. “I had a lot of freedom and I would be down at the paddocks pretending to be a botanist, picking leaves off plants and putting them in a scrapbook,” recalls the writer, filmmaker and explorer. “My father had all these wonderful natural history books and I had read something by Humboldt who had gone to the Amazon, and that was what I wanted to be when I grew up — an explorer and a botanist recording new plants around the world.”

Throughout her career, the 66-year-old has embarked on desert camel treks, researched nomadic tribes and contributed to scientific journals. Robyn’s solo desert trek in 1977, which took her more than 2700 kilometres from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean with four camels and her beloved dog Diggity, was covered by *National Geographic* magazine and captured international interest. Two years later, she wrote her memoir of the trip, *Tracks*, in London, in a “poky little flat, as far from central Australia as you can imagine,” she says. “The trip came back to me so vividly; I remembered pretty much every campsite of that eight-month journey.”

Tracks became an international bestseller and won the inaugural Thomas Cook Travel Book award in 1980, and, three decades later, a film adaptation starring Mia Wasikowska was released. Robyn has since written various books including *Desert Places*, which chronicled her year-long pilgrimage with the Rabari pastoral nomads of north-west India.

After years living and working overseas, she’s now settled in Australia and is restoring an old stone building

in Castlemaine, Victoria. She also has various projects on the go, including a memoir that is “loosely based” around her mother, Gwen, who tragically took her own life when Robyn was 11 years old.

Robyn inherited much of her creativity from her mother, and her wonder of nature and science from her father, Mark, who had travelled through Africa before settling back in Australia as a grazier. “My father was a wonderful naturalist and bushman and was most comfortable when he was on his own in the bush,” she says.

Born in 1950, Robyn spent her first four years at Stanley Park, a cattle station near Miles in west Queensland, with her sister, Margaret, who is five years older. By the mid 1950s, drought had forced the family to move east to the property at Mooloolah, where they grazed sheep. After her mother’s death, Robyn was sent to live with her aunt.

Later, after turning down a music scholarship, she travelled to Sydney at age 18. “I lived on the streets like a runaway, but I was exploring a whole new world,” Robyn says. “I never think of myself as a victim in terms of my history — there were things that went terribly wrong, but all of it contributes to the great mess that makes an individual.”

Her early years remain an inspiration. “It was such a rich childhood in so many ways. I think what it gave me was a very big repertoire — a love of nature and a love of the arts, having to deal with terrible, huge things and at the same time knowing that I was loved. When I think back to Mooloolah I just remember being in paradise.”

For more information, visit robyndavidson.com.au



PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY MARION WILLIAMS

I WAS BORN in Miles in 1950 and my first four years were spent on a Hereford cattle station, Stanley Park, near Miles, which was about 6000 hectares. My father had travelled a lot — he was a doctor’s son and he loved the bush and had been employed as a jackeroo on various cattle stations around Queensland. He saved money to go to Africa and had the life of the adventurer; he built a beautiful house with a thatched roof, poached ivory and harpooned crocodiles until he saw the error of his ways and, after that, he couldn’t bear to kill anything. He came back to Australia before the war and met my mother. Dad inherited the cattle station and took my mother out there to live. She was an urban girl and it wasn’t easy for her — there was no telephone or electricity and she taught my sister via School of the Air. >

I remember the smell of the lovely dry, crisp air, being on the swing and composing a symphony, then trying to climb up the back steps to hum it to my mother. She was very musical; she played piano and violin and would get people involved and play singsongs around the piano. My parents would read to us, we played dress-ups and there was always music.

We left Stanley Park because of the drought and moved to a 120-hectare property in the subtropical hinterland behind Noosa. Everything was so green! We had English sheep and, of course, it wasn't the right country for them. It was a lot of hard work and my dad did all the shearing and drenching by hand. Both my parents were very hard-working people. My mother was always trying to keep me in the house to do piano practice. I was divided between the outdoors life that was headed by my father and the indoors life headed by my mother. I would go down to the paddocks with Dad and I loved that.

My parents were so different, but they gave me a broad range of interests and skills. Dad had inherited the snobbishness of the squattocracy, but he couldn't quite live

up to it — he was too egalitarian in spirit. My mother was very ambitious for us girls; she wanted us to study music, have all of the accomplishments and be properly cultured. I hated music practice, but I am very glad she forced me to do it as I had minor talent and I almost followed that as a career.

My sister and I played a lot; she would be the leader of our games and there we were in 40-degree tropical heat in Mum's old ball gowns pretending we were lost in the snow and had wicked soldiers chasing us. It was fantastic and we had this incredibly rich imaginary world together. I never played mums and dads with dolls; it was dolls that were lost on a desert island. I had such a strong imagination; I never felt lonely and I had this rich inner life to go to and I still do — I absolutely need it.

Mooloolah Primary School was a small, one-and-a-half teacher school, and most of the people in that area were really poor, hardworking dairy farmers. My sister rode her horse to school. What I find extraordinary is that we had no resources whatsoever — only grey plasticine

“My mother was always trying to keep me in the house to do piano practice.”



FROM LEFT Robyn in her Red Cross uniform at Redcliffe, near Brisbane; and with her parents at their property, 'Malabah', near Caloundra.



and slate pencils and boards, but our teacher sent every kid out of there literate and numerate.

Mum was tiny, quite highly strung, very stylish and talented. She sewed all our dresses and she made our garden beautiful with flowers. She became very ill and we moved to the outskirts of Brisbane as she needed to be near doctors. I think that was the unravelling of the family; we all hated being closed in. I was suddenly in a new school with as many kids in my class as there had been in the entire school at Mooloolah. My mother eventually suicided and I was sent away to live with my aunt on Tambourine Mountain. I skipped school and was a bit of a handful. All of us in our different ways were struggling.

I learnt I had to look after myself and I was on my own. I'm quite an introverted person, but I must have had some deep confidence that I'd survive anything. This world is so interesting; there's this tug outwards into the extraordinariness of life — the marvellous strangeness of being alive.

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MOOLOOLAH Located 20 kilometres west of Caloundra, this small country town and hinterland of Mooloolah Valley has a population of about 3200 and is situated on the Mooloolah River. Grazing land was taken up in 1860 and timber cutting ensued in the area. A Cobb and Co service from Brisbane, through to Gympie in the north, had a stopping place at Mooloolah in 1868. In 1891, the outpost was connected to the North Coast railway line. The town experienced rapid growth in the 1980s due to its proximity to the Sunshine Coast and picturesque rural setting in the Glasshouse Mountains region. Mooloolah is close to Dularcha National Park, with its heritage-listed railway tunnel built in 1891, and shared trails allowing access for hikers, horse and mountain bike riders. Australia Zoo is a 15-minute drive south.