

Home and travel make for a novel plot

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IF travel does broaden the mind it can probably also help narrow and sharpen the focus of memory.

At least that seems to be the case for Richard Andrews who has written an “adventure-travel” novel which covers much of the world, but along the way borrows on the writer’s clear memories of growing up in Frankston and on the Mornington Peninsula.

Some of early scenes in *Key to the Highway* are centred on Frankston’s Kananook Creek - which formed the rear boundary of the Nepean Highway house in which Andrews spent much of his early life.

The novel follows mouth organ (harp) playing Chris Hunter on an “erotic motorbike fantasy” and the discovery of a magical blues harp through the Australian outback to Indonesia, India, Bangkok, Borneo and Rio.

Andrews, a journalist who lives on a former vineyard in Quebec, Canada with his “muse and wife” Marie Cordeau, has worked for the ABC and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, now freelances for newspapers, travel magazines, foundations, industry journals and IT companies while teaching part time at McGill University, Montreal.

Revisited and fictionalised in *Key to the Highway* are memories of a Trojan War with slingshots that happened when Andrews was 12 and led to “a smashed sleepout window and a few enemy injuries”.



Keeping with the historical references Andrews says “the Helen of Troy insult refers to the common amorous adventures at the Skye Road drive in”.

“The Classics Illustrated comics I read at the time influenced my interest in epics and mythology,” Andrews said.

Andrews says Frankston High School “was a bit rougher” when he went there, and Frankston teenagers were divided into “warring cliques of jazzers and rockers”.

He is quick to set the record straight that students from his matriculation year also “ended up as eminent lawyers, a St Kilda Club footballer and manager”.

There was also a dope smuggler - “now a genteel academic” - who offered some writing tips “following



his time in a Moroccan prison” and also his experiences appearing as one of the dystopian crazies in the Mad Max movie with Mel Gibson and Tina Turner.

Time spent snorkelling and spearfishing and experimenting with hyperventilation to stay longer underwater among the rocks at the bottom of Olivers Hill, near Canadian



Bay, are reflected the book’s mystical rock pool.

“The real venue of the disastrous biker’s buck’s night was a paddock in Baxter. The groom was not crippled but missed his step walking through a big fire. Luckily, his wife was a nurse who changed his bandages on their honeymoon,” Andrews said.

“The Argonauts’ disreputable van in the book was based on my multi-scarred FB Holden panel van, from where we descended on parties armed with guitars and half-gallon flagons of Wynvale claret.”

Key to the Highway is peppered with this blending and fictionalising of locations and anecdotes from many geographic locations.

“Other incidents and characters [in the book] are based on my experiences and people I met as a journalist

NOVELIST Richard Andrews in India in January, left and centre, and travelling the Nullarbor with his mate Foz in 1967. “As the skinniest, his job was to crawl under the van and check the leaky diff. Tragically, he died in an unexplained fire some years later.” Pictures: Supplied

and traveller across the outback and Asia: working at a Northern Territory copper mine, evading gas explosions at sea, blowguns in Borneo, an amoral Australian business executive who dealt with Chile’s Pinochet regime, a mate’s attempted jail break, two friends who escaped murder by Charles Sobhraj, the Charles Manson of the hippie trail,” Andrews said.

“The book itself started as an MA thesis for Newcastle University. I structured it around the works of mythologist Joseph Campbell and his influence on the Star Wars and Mad Max movies. The thesis gathered dust for about 20 years until the pandemic, when we moved to the countryside. During the lockdown, my wife suggested I rewrite it as a novel.”

In January, Andrews took his fantasies another step during a trip to India by trying to “take the harp into the Taj Mahal, as in the book, but a suspicious security guard took it off me”.

That ban was a lesson that while turning real life into fiction may come easy, external forces enter the scene when it comes to turning fiction into fact.

***Key to the Highway* Richard Andrews, *Untimely Books* amazon.com.au \$27.99; \$11.99 Kindle**