Marriages, Microscopes and Missions:
Three Women in Postwar Australia

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I dedicate this thesis to my husband Graeme, our sons Matthew, Tim and Chris, Sally Vidler, our grandsons Finley and Angus, and to the loving memory of Helen Roberts, Peter Roberts and Jean Kimble.
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Abstract

This doctoral thesis is called “Marriages, Microscopes and Missions: Three Women in Postwar Australia.” It takes the form of three stories and a research essay. The stories examine the lives of three Australian women in the decades following the Second World War, while the research essay discusses those lives and the influences that guided and informed the creative writing process. The stories are set in times that encompassed the White Australia Policy, fear of Communism, the Vietnam War, the feminist movement, the sexual revolution and the recent Northern Territory “Intervention.”

After the war, women were expected to fit back into the roles prescribed for them before the war. “Populate or Perish” was the catchcry. A single woman was expected, because of her biology, to marry and start a family at a time when marriage often meant losing her job.

But the war had changed women. Those who had had wartime jobs or joined the armed forces remembered the freedom, the pay packet and the realisation that they could do the job as well as a man. The old stereotype of women as handmaidens to men seemed out of step with the way women now saw themselves. But with men still in charge there was bound to be conflict ahead.

The first story, “The Doctor’s Wife,” looks at a married woman in coastal New South Wales living the prescribed “dream.” The second, “The Drug Analyst,” shows a Sydney-based career woman attempting to live on her own terms. The third, “The Minister’s Maid,” explores the changing role of an Aboriginal woman in a remote semi-traditional Northern Territory community. As each story unfolds within its own culture, physical landscape and carrying its history of conflict, the pressures placed on each woman to conform to her society’s expectations, become apparent.

In one way or another, the women in these stories are part of my family. While they sometimes find their identities and self esteem under threat, each is sustained by her strong connection to family and community. At this time in our history, finding a sense of belonging is sometimes a difficult task for young people, both white and black Australians. Perhaps that is why family stories are important. They establish our identity and give us a place in history, a sense of belonging to an ongoing, unfolding narrative.