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Border disputes: Meredith Jaffé on 'The Fence'

28 July 2016

Meredith Jaffé's examination of neighbourhood divisions in her debut *The Fence* (Macmillan, September) makes for an 'engaging and satirical novel' that 'explores a range of topics beyond mere border patrol disputes', [writes reviewer Thuy On](#). She spoke to the author.

When and how did the idea for *The Fence* start developing for you? Was it derivative of any real-life neighbourly spats you've had?

The idea for *The Fence* began with the character Gwen. She hovered about in my brain for ages. I'd write a few words about her and store them away for later. I knew Gwen had lived in the same street all her married life and Babs and Val were her neighbours. Beyond that though, I had no story. Babs dies, new neighbours move in, so what?

Then we had new neighbours, exchanging a couple of a similar vintage to us to a young family upsizing to their first home. We always knew they would possibly want a fence, what with a young child and a busy road and all. But what a fence they wanted! I became fascinated by how fraught with emotion and how divisive building a fence can be. That the emotional investment in a fence far outweighs the physical structure. Now Gwen had her story!

I thought the characterisation was very strong and even-sided (even though I was totally on team Gwen). Did you deliberately plan to structure the novel in alternate viewpoints?

Absolutely. I am completely fascinated by how much of our miscommunication with other people, be they friends, family, colleagues or neighbours, lies in the gaps between what we say and hear and how it is interpreted. We all have a filter system that affects how we perceive the world, and our insecurities often inform how we interpret the information we are given. We are all guilty, at one time or another, of assuming that if someone is reacting to us negatively, it is because of something we have said or done when it may be that their Nan just accidentally ran over the family dog. The wonderful thing about writing a novel is that it allows you to prise those gaps apart and reveal the inner workings of a character's mind.

These days, it feels like we are far more closed-in and not particularly community focussed; do you agree? How do you see contemporary neighbours interacting and do you feel there are neighbourly obligations?

In many ways, *The Fence* allowed me to indulge my nostalgia



for a remembered childhood where adult supervision was relaxed, kids roamed the streets and you knocked at back doors, not front doors, if you bothered to knock at all.

When I had my own kids, it felt like everything they did had to be organised and supervised. Around us were families who filled every waking moment of their children's lives with activity, and boredom was less an opportunity for creativity than it was another problem to be solved. Maybe this 'over-parenting' stems from a shift away from ourselves as members of a community to us as individuals in discrete family units. It's simplistic to say that without stay-at-home mums, the social glue is missing or that in the old days, parenting was more hands off; these days, we are so much more introspective and self aware and our busy lives are all-consuming. This seems to make us less inclined to prioritise the welfare of anyone outside our immediate circle, even if they are only over the fence.

Asking about neighbourly obligations is such an interesting question. We now live in the country and have discovered a very different attitude towards community and what it means to be a good neighbour. We are always popping over to each other's properties, lending a hand, keeping a distant eye on the kids. It doesn't feel like an obligation; it just feels like the right thing to do. Everyone pitches in, making life more fun and easy going. It makes me wonder whether living cheek by jowl, as we did in the city, is what made us draw in on ourselves and create boundaries to protect our privacy.

Did you research all the gardening tips in the novel or are you a keen green thumb yourself?

I'm afraid I am a definite armchair theorist. Despite having watched *Gardening Australia* since it first aired on the ABC, real gardening does somewhat elude me. To create an authentic gardening expert's voice, I read every gardening magazine, book and blog I could lay my hands on. I love the way the gardening columnists are united by this singular passion that infects their writing with such enthusiasm. I had a lot of fun trying to capture the tone. Now we live on acreage, we have a very large garden we affectionately call the home paddock. I'm trying very hard to heed the good advice I have acquired and green up that thumb!

You've been a reviewer, editor, interviewer and facilitator at literary festivals. You've dealt with other people's words throughout your career. So how does it feel to be on the other side of the fence (ha!) now that you've published a novel?

That's a very good question. I am your classic over-preparer. I would never go into an interview or on stage at a writers' festival without having researched the life out of the subject and written way more questions than I needed. Also, the great thing about facilitating is that the spotlight is not directed at you, you're there as the audience's voice and ears. I'm trying not to think about the role reversal too much. If I do, I might give myself stage fright! As for reviews, well it is such a shrinking market for literary pages and reviews of any kind. I will be grateful that anyone takes the time to read *The Fence* let alone put pen to paper to share their thoughts.

What was the last book you read and loved?

Sadly my completed pile is so much smaller than the to-be-read pile. I do so much reading for research, writers festivals and interviews and not a lot for pure pleasure. But I have snuck in a few pleasure reads this year. I love Nick Earl's novella project, *Wisdom Tree* (Inkerman & Blunt).

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