

STANDING ROOM ONLY

by Robin Robertson



When I visited the State Library of NSW for the first time, I was surprised to find there was standing room only. I couldn't find anywhere to sit and read, although there were plenty of chairs . . .

I was writing a history of knickers and researching it at the State Library. And, what an awesome place it was . . . a vast hall, with a ceiling five storeys high, walls lined with books and stained glass windows depicting noble deeds. Here, only higher thoughts were thought, and I rather hoped no one knew I was only thinking about knickers.

On my first day, I borrowed several fashion history books, and sat at a table with twelve chairs around it. I had it to myself, because it was only 9 am, and most people weren't up and learning yet.

After a while, a woman sat at my table and read a book. In keeping with library etiquette, I took no notice of her. But I knew she was there because she had a cold, and she'd left her box of tissues at home. She sniffed, and sniffed.

I moved out of earshot — about twenty tables away. I had just started to make notes in my shorthand pad when I felt someone staring at me. Looking up, I met the eyes of an elderly man who was glaring at me . . . yet, not at me . . . more through me. He was lost in some cranky thought, and wasn't seeing me at all.

I tried to ignore him, but couldn't. He referred to his many open books, did a sum on his calculator, then glared again into space, the

other end of which was me.

Again, I moved. This time I sat in a corner, facing a wall of books where I couldn't meet anyone's eyes. However, these books were the electoral rolls, bound into huge volumes, and people kept referring to them. They heaved them off the shelf, tottered under their enormous weight and dropped them, with a thud, onto the nearest table. Mine. It shuddered, and my pen hiccupped across my notes.

On the shelves adjacent to me, were books for tracing ancestry. These, too, were popular. People came in twos and threes — they often looked related — and whispered to each other as they perused the titles. What were they saying? Sometimes, I caught a tantalising word or two, but mostly they made a 'wissee wissee' sound, like leaves caught in the air conditioning duct.

I moved again. Now knowing there was more to a table than first met the eye, I searched for someone who knew the lay of the library.

I found one. She was sitting at a table in the middle of the library, with her reference materials spread around her . . . five thick volumes, all open, two microfiche packets, a stack of magazines, a cushion, a blanket over her knees and several changes of pen.

There was just room for me at the other end of her table. I would have liked to ask her what she was researching, but it wasn't library etiquette, and besides, she might have asked what I was researching.

But she knew her tables. It was a perfect spot. We spent a happy day together, not looking at each other once.

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