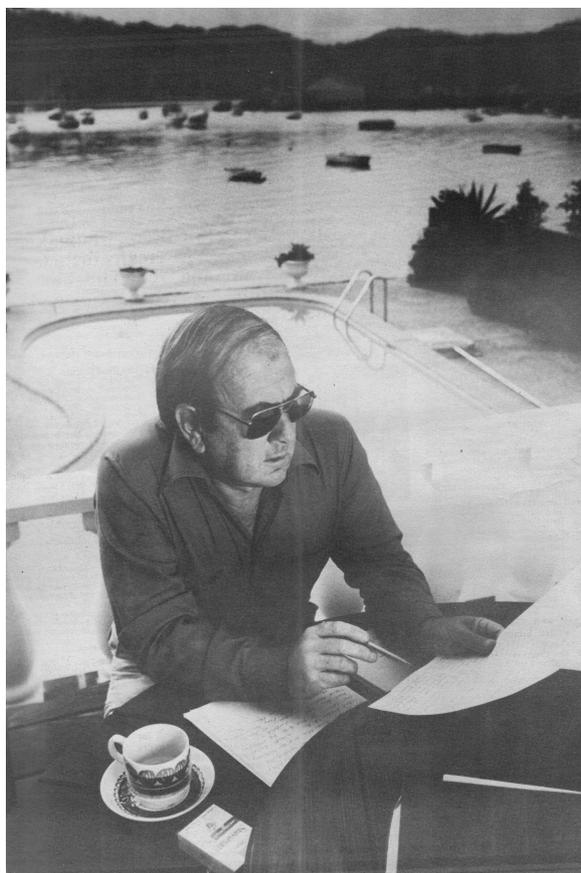


IT'S ALL IN YOUR MIND

Peter Yeldham

Cinema Papers #27 (June-July 1980)



Peter Yeldham working at home (1980)

A prolific writer for film, theatre, television and (recently) novels, Peter Yeldham's early credits include *Ride on Stranger*, *Golden Soak* and *The Timeless Land* for television plus the features, *Touch and Go* and *Weekend of Shadows*. After writing extensively for radio in Sydney, and just as television arrived in Australia (in 1956), Yeldham moved to England with his family where he remained for 20 years. With independent television taking off in the British Isles, Yeldham was employed writing for such shows as *Armchair Theatre*, *Shadow Squad Dial 999*, *Espionage*, *Crime Sheet*, *Inside Story*, *No Hiding Place*, *The Persuaders*, *Probation Officer*, *The Third Man*, *Van Der Valk*, *Zodiak*, *The Zoo Gang* and other British TV series. His play *Birds on the Wing*, had a long season in Berlin, and an extensive run in Paris, becoming Europe's top grossing play in 1972. More recently his books have included: *The Currency Lads* (1988) *Reprisal* (1994) *Without Warning* (1995) *Two Sides of a Triangle* (1996) *A Bitter Harvest* (1997) *Against the Tide* (1999) *Land of Dreams* (2002) *A Distant Shore* (2009) *Glory Girl* (2010) *The Murrumbidgee Kid* (2007) *Barbed Wire and Roses* (2008) *Above the Fold* (2014)

Peter Yeldham: When I started in radio it was a thriving industry (that was before television). However, I got a bit restless and decided to try overseas. What really got me moving away was the royal commission into the Australian television stations. I went along and heard Clive Evatt questioning Frank Packer about what he was going to do. Frank Packer refused to promise a quota, but he said "I've always treated Australians well; just trust me." So I went to Britain with my family. As expected, it was tough on my wife and our two very young children, until I actually got going.

Paul Davies: How did you get started?

Peter Yeldham: I was lucky in that I bumped into an Australian friend and he said, "Come and meet Spike Milligan." Spike had just started an agency over a fruit shop in Shepherd's Bush with a woman called Beryl Virtue, who was his agent. She also handled Simpson and Galton, Eric Sykes and Johnny Speight. Anyway, she took me on as a sort of challenge. Beryl turned out to be a marvelous agent. She soon moved into a building in Bayswater, and then into the West End. Today she is an Executive Producer for Robert Stigwood. I wrote drama plays for the first six or seven years, and then I switched to comedy, though never to the same extent as Spike and the others. They were writing situation comedy for television, which I could never do. It was a lucky meeting and Spike and the others were very good to me.

Paul Davies: So you arrived in Britain just before the golden period of British cinema.

Peter Yeldham: Yes, and just after the start of commercial television. Some pretty good things were being done for television, like *Maigret* and *Z Cars*. Unfortunately, many years later, the same things are still being done.

Paul Davies: You also wrote a number of screenplays for the major studios such as *The Liquidator* with Trevor Howard and Robert Taylor. Do you have a favourite film from that period?

Peter Yeldham: Funnily enough, it is the first one I wrote: *The Comedy Man* with Kenneth More. Although it was based on a book by Douglas Hayes about an of-out-of work actor in London, an awful lot of me went into it. I knew what it was like to be unemployed and almost starving in London. It was the most personal of the films. *The Comedy Man* was the first time I wanted to write a comedy. There is a magical moment in a crowded cinema or theatre when you hear people start to laugh; it is very heady. So, from then on, and until I came back to Australia, I was writing comedy almost exclusively, in plays and films.

Paul Davies: Everybody says Comedy is the hardest to write. What is the tip when you don't have a live audience to feed off?

Peter Yeldham: You to make yourself smile, if not laugh, when you are writing it. I have done a couple of stage plays in collaboration, and on one in particular we had the criterion that if we both laughed, the gaggle line stayed in. Sometimes, we made ourselves laugh so much that we were lying on the floor, corpsed with laughter. Occasionally though, the next day we found we had had too good a lunch and that it

wasn't really that funny. It is very hard to define comedy. Of all the writers I knew, none of them were funny people. Many of them were very sad characters, forever worrying. Tony Hancock was the supreme example.

Paul Davies: Is it good to work with actors when writing comedy?

Peter Yeldham: It's usually impossible - except for stage plays. There you can work extensively with actors, particularly when you are on tour. It is quite dramatic going from town to town and you do tend to rewrite a lot. I had one play open in Liverpool called *Birds on the Wing*, which I think is the best stage play I have done. Everyone laughed all the way through. Then somebody said those terrible words, "it's going to run forever in the West End", which usually means it only runs three months. We then took the play to Coventry - where nobody laughed. It is a different humour there and the actors were far removed from the audience. It was like a different play.

Paul Davies: When things started taking off for you in Britain, did producers approach you for scripts, or were you still writing on 'spec'?

Peter Yeldham: They started coming along after the first few television shows. If you work on one television series, they'll ask you to do another one. Then somebody would see that, and ask you to do one of theirs, and so on... You get busy very quickly. I think the training I had in radio, where one had to write quickly and worked very hard, also helped. When I first went to Britain, writers felt that if they wrote something every three months they were doing a lot of work. I find that unless I am busy, I'm bored.

Paul Davies: You then came back to Australia just as the local cinema was getting off the ground...

Peter Yeldham: I returned a couple of times for visits, but I came back for good in 1976. There was a sort of déjà vu feeling about Britain in the 1970s; we just seemed to be doing the same things again. The film industry had gone pretty dead, as had television. This is one of the reasons why I came back. In fact, the only reason I stayed so long in Britain was because I was having a good run with my stage plays.

Paul Davies: Do you still have an urge to write plays?

Peter Yeldham: Yes, though I haven't written one since I came back. I find plays the hardest of all things to write in Australia.

Paul Davies: Why is that? Is it because it's easier to raise money for films?

Peter Yeldham: For a start, you have to sit down and write a play - nobody is going to ask you to write one. Also, I have been inundated with television work, and one tends to do what is paying. Another reason is that I haven't come to terms with the sort of plays I want to write out here.

Paul Davies: Looking at your record in television, one notices that you have done an extraordinary number of adaptations. Is the coincidence or have you pursued adaptations?

Peter Yeldham: Well, I hardly ever did adaptations in Britain; it was almost all originals. But since I have been back, I have worked mainly for the ABC and they like to do a lot of Australian classics. There was only one occasion where I sought out an adaptation and that was *Ride on Stranger*, which I just happened to borrow from the library one day. I intended to read a couple of chapters, but ended sitting up all night. The next day I rang Kylie Tennant and asked if the rights were still available for television. She said they were, so I went to see her. I then took out a sort of option on the book and went to the ABC with a three page outline. I also suggested they read the book, but someone replied: “No, if you’re that enthusiastic, we’ll do it.” I think it turned out well and maybe the reason is that they put all that responsibility on me.



On location for *Ride on Stranger*
L-R Michael Aitkins, Liddy Clark, Peter Yeldham

Paul Davies: Did you have much discussion with Tennant?

Peter Yeldham: No, she stood back from it. We just had a lunch and she said, “Look, it’s a book, and I know you’re going to make a television series, so do exactly what you want.” We made a lot of changes, but I think we kept the spirit of the book.

Paul Davies: Did you need extra research into the historical setting when adapting the book?

Peter Yeldham: No, because it was all pretty well documented in the book. Also, a lot of those things Kylie was writing about in the 1930s I had gone through in Sydney in the late 1940s and early 1950s – the anti-communism and the Liberal fringe groups, for instance. So, again, I felt I was writing about my youth.

Paul Davies: You have also written *The Timeless Land* for the ABC. Is it a series?

Peter Yeldham: Yes. There are eight one-hour episodes. It begins in 1788 and continues for the next 22 years. It starts with Phillip, then jumps time a bit and becomes mainly concerned with the fictional characters of Eleanor Dark’s book. All

of this is against the authentic background of what happened – the rum trading, the revolt against Bligh and so on.

Paul Davies: Are you worried about covering some of the same historical ground as *Against the Wind*?

Peter Yeldham: Not at all. Theirs was mainly the story of a girl and her life, whereas ours is a fairly different canvas. Eleanor Dark's books were authentically researched, and we have stuck fairly carefully to history, although it is by no means a history lesson.

Paul Davies: Have you found a difference working with Australian directors as opposed to British or American ones? Is it easier to get access to a director overseas once your script has been accepted?

Peter Yeldham: Yes. When I first came back, there was a tendency to say, "Thanks for the script, now go away and we'll do it." I told them that wasn't the way I worked overseas. Luckily - working with Carl Schultz twice - I have experienced a very good working relationship. And this is now happening with other directors, as well. I just made it known that I was available at any time if they wanted to change things. I have always said, "Don't get the tea lady or the set designer to do it, call me. It's my job." I wrote this scripts of *The Timeless Land* a year ago, for example, but last week I was called in to rewrite a scene that wasn't quite right, and which was being filmed the following day. I like to follow someone through, and even be involved in, or consulted on, the editing. This happened with *The Timeless Land* and *Ride On Stranger*, and it made me feel a part of the whole thing. It wasn't the case of knocking out a script, taking the money, and going away.

Paul Davies: Another of your television shows, *Golden Soak*, starred Ray Barrett who is a personal friend. Did you have him in mind, or was that just coincidence?



Ray Barrett and David Cameron in *Golden Soak* (1979)

Peter Yeldham: Good luck really. It was a co-production, so the producers wanted somebody who would be known overseas. Ray was available, and he is known abroad and here. I was very pleased, of course. I am writing a new series for the ABC at the moment which Ray will be starring in. That has been written with him in mind.

Paul Davies: Is it an original work?

Peter Yeldham: Yes. It is called *Sporting Chance* and Ray is playing a sports journalist.

Paul Davies: When doing an adaptation, do you lift the dialogue straight out?

Peter Yeldham: Very rarely. Generally, I read the work very thoroughly twice, making notes and marking the things that are very relevant to the book. Then I can put it aside. I have absorbed so much as I want.

Paul Davies: So you don't consult it when writing?

Peter Yeldham: No. I never look at the book.

Paul Davies: Have writers ever accused you of destroying their work?

Peter Yeldham: No. The only feedback I have had was from Kylie, who wrote me a lovely letter saying she thought I had given her story a new dimension. She was very pleased.

Paul Davies: Do you think a writer should have some say in the casting?

Peter Yeldham: It is good if you can, but it's not always possible. I am usually consulted on casting, particularly when I work with Carl. We will go through *Showcast* (casting directory) together, and maybe get the choice down to three or four people. Then I leave it to him.

Paul Davies: Do you write with particular actors in mind?

Peter Yeldham: Very rarely. Once or twice I have done it and they have not been available.

Paul Davies: You have had a great deal to do with writers guilds in Australia and Britain. Do you find that writers are hard to organize industrially?

Peter Yeldham: Yes, probably because they are a very small industrial base. One of the reasons I became involved was that when I was writing radio in Australia there was no guild. We were paid and treated badly, and had no clout at all. And unless you get some kind of organization going, you will be screwed every time.

Paul Davies: Where should the main effort of the guilds be placed?

Peter Yeldham: The two main areas are our image and contracts. We recently had a long battle with the ABC over contracts, and though it was over, in another sense we

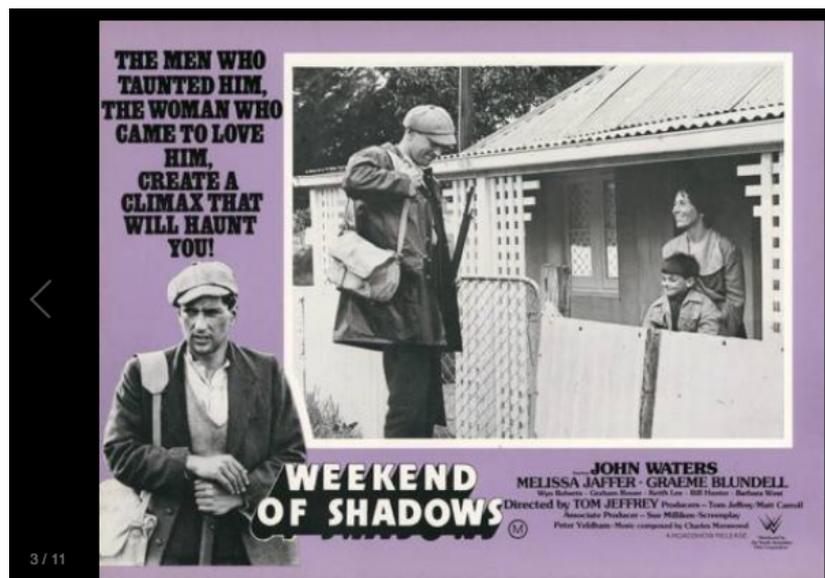
were just gearing up for the next round in a few years time. We also have to put a stop to the Australian Film Commission's 50 films. Do you realize that not one writer was mentioned? They mentioned the director, the producer, the cinematographer and the stars, but not the writer. It was quite incredible, and even a writer-producer like Joan Long was listed just as a producer. These are the things we have to stop.

Paul Davies: Do you feel there is still an ignorance of the function of writer in Australia?

Peter Yeldham: Yes, but it is certainly much better than it was. One of the amazing things that happened to me when I first went to Britain was that somebody said, "Let's talk about it over lunch." Take a writer out to lunch? Christ, that never happened to me in Australia.

Paul Davies: David Puttnam, during his recent visit, said a country could only expect to have three really great directors and four great writers. Do you think that is fair comment?

Peter Yeldham: No. It may be true of small countries like Sweden and Australia but it is certainly not true of the U.S. Actually a lot of the other things Puttnam said make sense – particularly how people always say "the trouble with Australian films is the scripts". We get some excellent scripts, some adequate scripts and some poor scripts, just like any other country. What we really lack is the creative, hustler-type Producer you find overseas. Some of them are terrible bastards to deal with, and they will screw you if they can. But if they believe in your work, they will fight to the death to get it produced. Whereas in Australia, with all the insecurity at present one only needs to get frown from the AFC commissioner before somebody says "Let's change the script." We had this problem with the one real disaster I wrote here, *Weekend of Shadows*. We had a constant changes and insecurity about it, right up to the day of shooting. I think many of these changes didn't help the film.



Poster for *Weekend of Shadows* starring John Waters (1978)

Paul Davies: There is a lot of discussion about ensuring our films are more international in flavor. Having worked here and abroad, what do you see as the necessary ingredients?

Peter Yeldham: It is hard to answer. But the best way to be international is to be truly national. If you go for a mid-Atlantic or a mid Pacific type product, that's what you end up with. It probably plays to packed houses in Fiji, but that's all. The British found this in film and television. It was only when they started making genuinely British shows that they started selling overseas. In some ways it is like the situation with *The Sullivans*: it is a very Australian show, yet it is starting to sell in the U.S.

Paul Davies: You were in Britain during the recent rise and fall of the film industry. Do you see any common trends in Australia?

Peter Yeldham: The failure rate is growing, as we make more films. That first honeymoon, when people went to see Australian films because they were Australian, is over. And what is happening in its place is this tendency to say "We have to sell to the U.S. so let's Americanise it. That's what worries me most of all, because it may mean we become a service industry like the British.

Paul Davies: Do we have a screenwriting industry in Australia?

Peter Yeldham: If you include television, it is becoming quite an industry. I am not sure but there must be about 25 Half hours of serials a week and that means quite a few writers are employed. How long they work on those series is, of course, another thing. Even in the best days in Britain people used to say that most of the writing was being done by about 50 writers even though there were 800 members in the British guild. I guess it is somewhat the same here.

Paul Davies: Rosemary Anne Sisson remarked two years ago that she was amazed to find that there were so many active professional writers in Australia. Are we the lucky country in that respect?

Peter Yeldham: I hope we're going to be a lucky country, and it is a battle that will keep going on. We're always in danger of television stations cutting out and films failing, though at the moment we're doing alright. I think a good sign is the shorter series which the commercial stations are doing. Hopefully out of those will come some quality shows which we can sell abroad.

Paul Davies: Do you see the shorter series as a reaction against the endlessness of the serials?

Peter Yeldham: I think so. Some of those serials do go on and on. Still, the advantage of the serial is that people are working, and you can only get better by working. We have a good depth of acting talent; what we need is a lot more directors and writers. But the situation is improving all the time.

Paul Davies: Could you tell us about your new film *Touch and Go*?



Chantal Contouri, Wendy Hughes, Carmen Duncan *Touch and Go* (1980)

Peter Yeldham: It is a light and entertaining comedy-thriller. The original idea was Peter Maxwell's, who is the director. The idea was to use Hayman Island and, because of Reg Ansett's connection with the place, and Ansett Airlines. But Ansett could never see the joke about having this island robbed. We should've known, I suppose, after looking at his photograph.

Paul Davies: You haven't refloated the idea with Rupert Murdoch?

Peter Yeldham: No. By that time we had the money together.

Paul Davies: What's the hardest part about writing?

Peter Yeldham: Starting. The first five or so pages often takes me days. I once did a stage play and the first act took me three months, while the second took six days. I suppose it's all in your mind, but I always find the second half of the script is written much more quickly than the first.

Paul Davies: There is a great emphasis these days on having a script editor. How important are they?

Peter Yeldham: I find an editor can be handy, but I preferred to work with the director, or even the executive producer. The advantage of the script editor is, if you get stuck in the middle, you can ring him up and have him throw ideas at you. On the whole, though, the function of the script editor should be as unobtrusive as possible.

Paul Davies: Can you imagine going back to work in Britain?

Peter Yeldham: No, I think my future is here. I have really enjoyed these past couple of years. When I first left Australia, people thought a scriptwriter was the man who sat in the back of a chemist shop, copper plating the bottles of old medicine. At least

now, when you say you are a writer, they don't ask "But what do you do for a living?" That is the big improvement since I left.

Paul Davies: You are part of a generation of Australians who left this country out of the belief that there weren't big opportunities here...

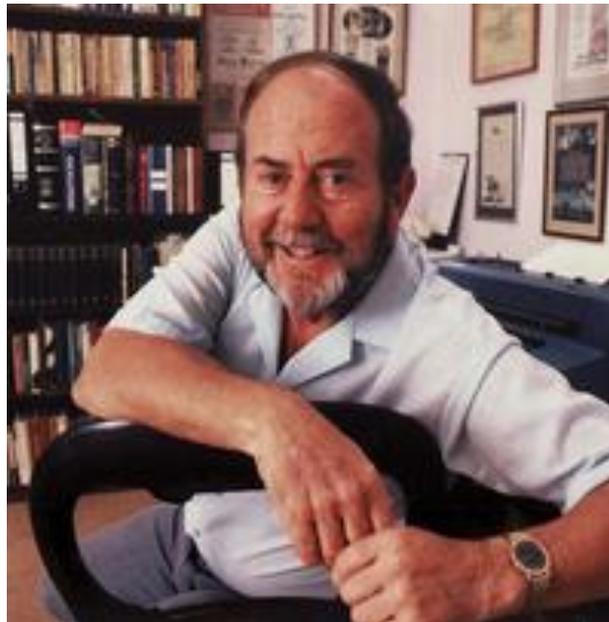
Peter Yeldham: Yes. Quite apart from what I said about Frank Packer, I really went abroad for a year or two to get some experience, which a lot of other people did. But it went so well for me that I stayed. Actually, a lot of people still can't quite forgive me for being away all that time. "Expatriate" has become a sort of dirty word. When I grew up, expatriates were glamorous figures, like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. But in Australia it became: "You abandoned us."

Paul Davies: You have a number of future plans, but do you have an overall strategy?

I have this new series for the ABC, which is going to take me all year, and I have a couple of ideas for films which I would like to do. I'd also like to work again as a writer and co-producer, as I did on *Touch And Go*, because I really enjoyed being involved in pre-and post-production.

Paul Davies: Very few writers are in that position...

Peter Yeldham: Yes, and more of us should be. I know Joan Long and Margaret Kelly are trying to do this, as is John Dingwell. Obviously, we need experience producers beside us, but giving writers are creative say Will help our films and help us as well.



Peter Yeldham Filmography

AUSTRALIA

Features

Touch and Go

Weekend of Shadows

Television Series

Ride on Stranger

Run from the Morning

Golden Soak

The Timeless Land

Television Play

Money in the Bank

BRITAIN

Features

The Comedy Man

The Liquidator

The Long Duel

Age of Consent

Our Man in Marrakesh

10 Little Indians

24 hours to Kill

Stage Plays

Birds on the wing

Fringe benefits

But She Won't Lie Down

Away Match

Television Plays

Thunder on the Snowy

A Visit from Anna

East of Christmas

The Cabbage Tree Hat Boys

A Sort of Stranger

The Gambler

A Dragon to Kill

Reunion Day

The Juggler

A Really Good Jazz Piano

Ant and the Grasshopper

Co-Produced Television Series

Birds on the Wing
The Five Midnights
Mis-adventure
Harriet's Back in Town

Television Series

Love Story
Maigret
No Hiding Place
Van der Valk
The Zoo Gang (U.S. series)
Espionage (U.S. series)
The Persuaders
Ward 10
Probation officer
Zodiac
The nurses (U.S. series)
The Third Man



Helen Mirren, James Mason *Age Of Consent* (1969)

In recent years Peter Yeldham has turned to writing novels with some of his most popular recent works being:

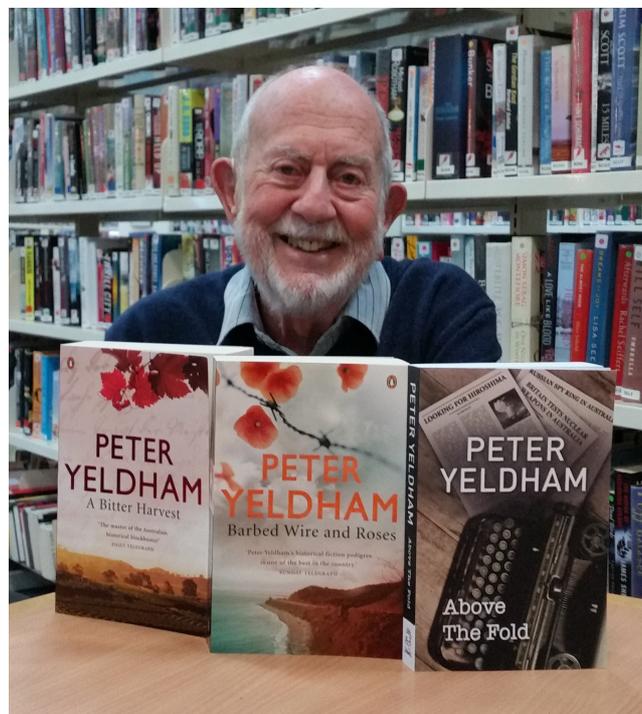
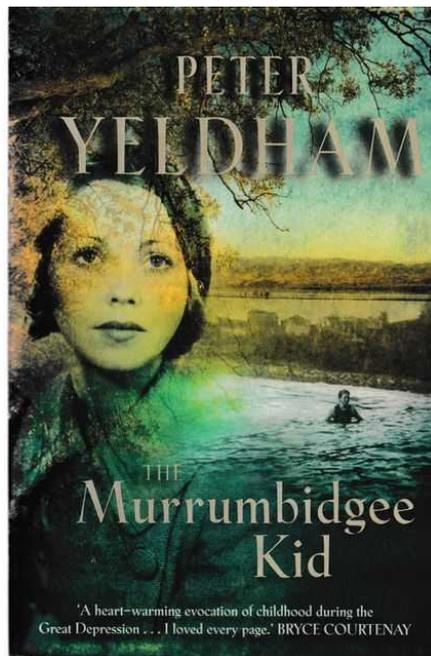
A Bitter Harvest

Barbed Wire and Roses

The Last Double Sunrise

Beginning with an Empty Page

The Murrumbidgee Kid



From screenwriter to book author

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