

HEARING VOICES

Elizabeth Huntley

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Elizabeth Huntley trained as a teacher at La Trobe University, and performed Disability Support Work at the North Melbourne Institute of TAFE before attending screenwriting courses at both Open Channel and the Australian Film and Television School. She worked as a production assistant on Sharon Connolly's *Nice Girls Like Us* and then as a research assistant for the La Trobe University Media Production Unit. She has since written for several children's television series including *Driven Wild*, *Driven Crazy* and *Chuck Finn*. Subsequently, Elizabeth became a regular writer on the ABC series *Something In The Air* and has also worked on the apparently endless Australian serial, *Neighbours*.

Paul Davies: How did you get into writing for television ?

Elizabeth Huntley: I joined a writing group doing a Dip Ed at La Trobe. I wrote a one act play which people liked and responded to. I particularly liked the idea of writing for voices. A year later, Rosa Colossimo, who was one of the group and who later made the film *Moving Out*, asked me to submit some ideas to a producer she was then working for. This was a 10BA project - a telemovie - but that scheme eventually folded and the film unfortunately didn't get made. I did a few more things for her but nothing came of it. Then I thought of doing more of my own stuff and James Clayden, a director, asked me if I'd be interested in scripting a children's movie he'd been working on. I had a look at what he'd done, but it

didn't relate to anything I felt I could do. So he asked if there was something in my experience I'd like to work on. And this made me think about my own childhood and I came up with an idea for a film which I still haven't managed to get made, but which I put about 10 years of my life into.

Paul Davies: What was that called ?

Elizabeth Huntley: *The Bush Billy*. It was based on my childhood growing up on a farm on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. The script has changed so much over the ten years I've been working on it. But it was a fantasy story set around my family. I got some initial funding from the AFC to write a treatment and then I took it to Bob Weiss. He optioned it for a number of years and we worked on various drafts together.

Paul Davies: It went into development hell ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. It fell into that problem where the special effects became too expensive.

Paul Davies: This is the fantasy element ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. It grew and grew. It didn't start out all that much as a fantasy. Bob pushed the fantasy element and wanted to develop that. He wanted it to be more of an action adventure. So it kept growing and growing and I think it outgrew the original size of the idea. And I didn't know enough about what I was doing at that stage. However, thanks to that project I learnt a huge amount about writing. Unfortunately, it went on for so long that I started to lose confidence. So the move into television has helped enormously in terms of bypassing what I felt was my falling into a bit of a black hole with writing. It even got to a point where I was wondering whether I should even pursue this career (laughs).

Paul Davies: How did the television work come about ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Somebody I knew was working at *Neighbours* as a script editor. They actually had a job going as a storyliner. I didn't know a lot about how TV worked, but I bowled up and then realised I hadn't done enough research on the programme. I hadn't seen enough of it on air. You really need to know a programme to function effectively in that kind of job. I felt I'd much rather be on the writing end of it anyway, so they gave me an audition script and they liked what I did. Then they offered me a couple of episodes but I think I got bogged down in the timing. I didn't realise how critical that was. How each segment (the bits between the ads) had to be exactly 7 or 8 minutes long.



Neighbours – Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan tie the knot

Paul Davies: So on *Neighbours* a writer is handed a complete scene breakdown ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. You just do the one draft and you're given 10 days - which I thought was only a short amount of time. But I now realise that was a total luxury (laughs). I quite enjoyed it except that I kept getting bogged down in this timing thing.

Paul Davies: What was the problem there ? Your timings were out ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. And in order to get the timings right I became obsessed with going back and editing and then editing and editing to try and get it down. But I think I thereby destroyed what I had written. So it really came across as being very constipated. And they ended up saying to me: "we just don't know what's happened to you because we really liked what you did at first". I was also pretty appalled when I saw what I'd done on air.

Paul Davies: Can you talk about that ?

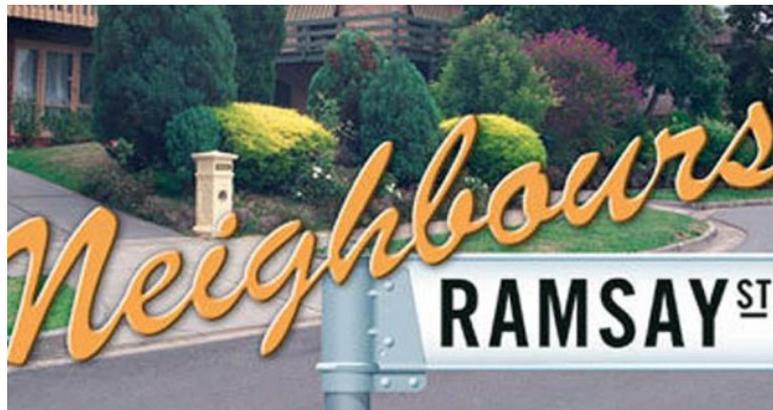
Elizabeth Huntley: I think it was just the shock of seeing actors speaking your words. It made me realise how some of the things you imagined were going to work and be spoken in a certain way end up being spoken in an entirely different way.

Paul Davies: Were they the same words at least ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Some of them. Some had been edited and changed. I thought some of it had really worked fantastically. But other bits you think - if I'd been the director I would have done that scene very differently.

Paul Davies: Is this a problem built into the nature of television writing ? That the writer sits alone at home all the time ? Away from the set...

Elizabeth Huntley: Well I think with a show like *Neighbours* it would be very difficult to involve the writer anyway. They have to keep such a tight rein on everything. But certainly, ideally, I think it would be fantastic if the writer was able to follow through with the script. As far as I know in the past, writers used to be there to take a script right through to production. I remember Gwenda Marsh telling me about that kind of thing at Crawfords.



Paul Davies: And then after *Neighbours* ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Bob Weiss teamed me up with David Rapsey to progress *The Bush Billy* idea but by then I was losing heart with the project. As it turned out, however, David was producing a children's TV series called *Driven Crazy* for Barron Films. They had a script that had fallen into difficulty and they only had the money for a writer to do one draft. So David asked me to do that, which I did. Which I really enjoyed. That series was finally produced and screened in 1999. That led to another script on the second series called *Driven Wild* which was script produced by Ysabelle Dean. She proved to be a terrific support for me because she sat me down and went through the scripts I was writing and pointed out fairly obvious things that I hadn't caught up with. And so via Ysabelle, I then got jobs on two of the *Chuck Finn* series which was also a Barron production.

Paul Davies: What was the concept behind the *Driven Crazy/Driven Wild* series ?

Elizabeth Huntley: It was about a father who was a bit of a nomad with his two kids. They were travelling Victoria, going from town to town in a huge old car. He was a jack of all trades and the kids didn't go to any regular school. The girl was 15 and the boy, who was younger did a correspondence course. Their education - or lack of it - was always a bit of an issue and they would tap into schools along the way, depending on where the father got work. So it was about fitting in. I enjoyed writing it. Though I would have enjoyed it more if I'd felt more confident of myself as a writer. But that's where Ysabelle was such a great help.

Paul Davies: And *Chuck Finn* ? This sounds like a bad run of luck going back to the *Bush Billy* saga.

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. In fact, in 1998 I worked on another series for Barron Entertainment developed by Carol Drouyn called *Wild Kat* and that came to grief too. I wrote one episode but as soon as I finished writing it, the production came to a halt.

Paul Davies: Then you started writing *Something In The Air* ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. Just before the *Chuck Finn* series came along I worked on *Something In The Air*. Which was a terrific experience. I worked with Adam Todd, Jenny Sharp and Kirsty Fisher as editors. I wrote five blocks all up. That's like 10 half hour episodes. It was the first adult show I'd worked on.

Paul Davies: What are the differences writing for kids as opposed to adult drama ?



Main Cast for *Something In the Air* (2000 -2002)

Elizabeth Huntley: I think the kids' drama is harder. When I started on *Something In the Air* I expected it to be much more difficult writing for adults. But in fact, I was amazed to find it was easier. With dialogue for example you've got a lot more leeway. In children's drama a lot of it has to be very action specific and entertaining in a way that doesn't come all that easily.

Paul Davies: Do you cast yourself back to when you had your own children ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. Well I do. (laughs) But there's a bit of a danger in that because my sons are grown up now and it would be getting a bit old fashioned to cast back to when they were young. But I find myself catching up with neighbours' kids. And of course I'm constantly eavesdropping on conversations. Hearing the latest expressions and so on.

Paul Davies: Do you find yourself keeping a little notebook ?

Elizabeth Huntley: I do. And frequently I've got pieces of paper in my handbag with snippets written all over them. And then I forget about them of course and ages later they pop up again...(laughs) I've also got a file of weird and wonderful pieces of paper - random ideas.

Paul Davies: And so *Something In the Air* also came to an end unfortunately.

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. Indeed. At the moment I'm waiting to do something on a film idea that I've been working on with James Clayden. Which is like going in circles back to where it all started. It's called *The Unidentified Woman*. An idea that James has been working on for a few years. And he asked me if I'd be interested in trying to do something with it. There's no funding yet. But we're waiting to hear.

Paul Davies: *Something In The Air* was a Simpson Le Meaurier/ ABC coproduction. Is there a difference working on a show like that compared to writing for commercial networks ?

Elizabeth Huntley: It's hard to compare because with children's television, which is where I worked with the commercial networks, there are a lot of rules and regulations anyway. In terms of language, the material you deal with. And also because a lot of those programmes were quite ambitious in what they would like, ideally, to use in terms of special effects. So you're very conscious of budgets. You have to realise extraordinary ideas with quite modest resources.

Paul Davies: The ABC would also be pretty cash strapped wouldn't it ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. I found when I was doing *Something In the Air* that a lot of things you wanted to put in just couldn't happen because we couldn't afford it.

Paul Davies: **Is that a problem or a challenge for a writer ?**

Elizabeth Huntley: Sometimes it's frustrating, but sometimes you also find it can work better if you think about it in a different way. It really depends. There are times when you think something is going to work in a particular way and when you see it made you realise it would have been better if you'd gone for something simpler. What you sometimes see on the screen often defeats the purpose of having attempted it in the first place.

Paul Davies: **As I understand it, a lot of *Something In The Air* was often done with one take. So it was more a matter of just - get the lines right and that's it. It's remarkable it achieved the quality it did.**

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. It is. It was a really nice show to work on. It was hard at first though. The first episode I wrote there I thought it was really pretty awful - watching it back on air. And I didn't anticipate they'd ever give me any more work. It was the episode about the Olympic torch coming through Emu Springs. And the problem was they had to rethink the story a lot because they kept getting feedback from the legal department that you couldn't do this... and you couldn't do that... There was an issue of copyright around the torch itself.

Paul Davies: **I remember that episode. The torch ended up looking like a milk shake container with a jam tin on top.**

Elizabeth Huntley: (laughs) Yes. And I think that, as a result, the story ended up being all over the place. Not really hanging together. The plot definitely fell apart.

Paul Davies: **Which is hardly your fault...**

Elizabeth Huntley: No. Except it was my fault that I wasn't as experienced as I should have been.

Paul Davies: **But they liked it enough to offer you four more blocks.**

Elizabeth Huntley: Yes. And that was fantastic. The show was a very rewarding experience and I just wished it had been able to keep on going.

Paul Davies: **What is it that attracts you to writing for the box - given it's such a rocky road - with the uncertainty of shows coming to grief financially,**

the difficulty raising money and so on...

Elizabeth Huntley: I think it's because writing for television is the only thing I've ever found that I'm any good at. (laughs) That I also enjoy doing. The reward I get is being able to think myself into the characters and actually hear their voices in my head. And with a little bit of help I translate that onto the page. If I clearly hear the voices, though - it doesn't always happen - but with *Something In The Air* you get to know the characters so well that it becomes quite effortless. At other times you're struggling to find the character. But once you do it's really a rewarding process.

Paul Davies: Is it a matter of research. Just watching the show ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Well *Something In the Air* hadn't been to air when I wrote my first episode. So I don't know quite how well I had the characters down that first time at all. But then, yes, I watched it and became very familiar with the actors. And also reading other people's scripts helped.

Paul Davies: Do you have a day structure to how you work ?

Elizabeth Huntley: For me it's pretty random because I tend to be undisciplined unless I'm working to a deadline. I get very disciplined if I have a deadline. In which case I switch on the computer about 8.30 am and work right through. I should probably restrict myself a bit. I tend to work through till four in the afternoon. But as time runs out I will work day and night. It also depends on how familiar I am with the series. In the end, with *Something In The Air*, I found I could do it a lot faster. So you tend to relax a bit about the time available. With the first one I wasn't sure I was even going to be able to do it. The time allowance seemed very tight (a week for the scene breakdown, two weeks to take two half-hour episodes to first draft).

Paul Davies: Do you feel the writer in television is given due recognition ?

Elizabeth Huntley: Writers don't get a lot of recognition. I notice it more in regard to film than television. I know they don't in TV. But in television it's such a kind of group thing anyway. You're part of a team and there are so many people. So much can change from the time it leaves your hands to what comes up on screen. It changes - not because someone doesn't like what you've done, but out of necessity. It all has to conform to the story line before or after your particular episode. But even in film, writers have a hard time. Some do get recognition of course. But on the whole they don't. Films tend to be associated more with directors. A film by... and so on. It astounds me sometimes that you practically have to search to find out who wrote something - for their credit. But the whole thing may have been that writer's original idea. They may have put

years of work into it, plus a lot of their personal life. Then they've given the director the blue print. And the writer hardly rates a mention. It seems unfair but that's what happens to writers all the time.

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