

“IT’S NOT SOMETHING THEY CHAT ABOUT OVER A BEER BECAUSE THEIR LIVES WERE AT STAKE, ESPECIALLY IN A PLACE LIKE BALI”

PICTURE \ JASON CHILDS

Spending several years researching drug bosses and the “mules” and “horses” who carry their illegal wares in and out of Bali can do strange things to a writer. “I guess it’s like in some ways when you go and see a movie and you’re completely in that world and you step out in the middle of the day and it’s like, ‘Oh, wow,’” says Kathryn Bonella.

I’m in a café in Bali, talking to the Australian writer who co-authored Schapelle Corby’s autobiography, *My Story*, and wrote *Hotel Kerobokan*, the inside story of Bali’s notorious jail. Her most recent release is *Snowing in Bali*, about the world of drug trafficking on the Indonesian island and the characters whose glamorous lives are often interrupted by long stints in what Bonella describes as a “hellhole”.

“I’ve found these books thrilling, interviewing these people, and being – not part of their world, because obviously I don’t condone what they do – but finding it exciting,” Bonella says. “And sometimes after I’d finished (writing), I was thinking it was a bit dull outside that world. The people I’d been talking to for these books, especially *Snowing*, were often really smart.

“They lived outside the law – and again I don’t condone what they do – but they were smart enough not to get busted for years. They are kind of exciting people. It’s an exciting world to visit and spend two years in.”

Snowing in Bali is disturbing reading, with stories of drugs and sex, the profound naivety or stupidity of drug

palm trees and Hindu temple it resembled, she says, “a cheap Balinese resort”, which is how it earned its Hotel K nickname. It also had a particular culture.

“Westerners need money in there to survive,” she says. “You can pay for a room upgrade, you can pay for a room on your own, you can pay to have drugs, anything. It’s almost like a hotel. There were hooker nights. I realised the jail would be a story itself.”

Bonella came to know many of the players and the inmates. Access wasn’t a problem. “It’s tightened up since the book came out and since the jail has become more high profile,” she says. “I was able to wander all around the jail back then.”

She got to know Ruggiero, a Brazilian, and Juri, an Italian, then others agreed to talk.

Juri, who got married in Hotel K, had been busted with nearly five kilograms of cocaine in his surfboard bag. Bonella came to know him when she was doing the Corby book. “He relished telling stories, as most of them did,” she says. “I got a lot of people prepared to talk on the record about their time in Hotel K.”

To ensure their stories were as accurate as possible, Bonella spent weeks in the “rat-infested” archives of the *DenPost* and *Bali Post* newspaper offices – where nothing is computerised – going through old newspapers and finding articles on Hotel K to cross-reference what the inmates had told her.

Why did they talk? “I think that for the prisoners

dealers told me stuff they said they hadn’t told anybody. They hadn’t told their partners or anyone else in the drug business. No one had asked. It’s not something they chat about over a beer because their lives were at stake, especially in a place like Bali.”

Many drug mules, or “horses”, scored a \$10,000 payday. One mule who took the deathly risk for as little as \$2000 was caught. “I think it’s bizarre,” says Bonella. “I met some of these horses – they’re educated, multilingual, often from very wealthy families, often surfers, and they have come here for an easy \$10k and a holiday. They don’t take much persuasion.

“[Drug boss] Andre spelled out exactly how he trains the horses. If they were going to Indonesia, he would say to them once, ‘Do you understand – it’s the death penalty in Indonesia with drugs’. He’d done that and his conscience was clear and if they decided to do it he wouldn’t focus on that anymore.

“He would teach them to visualise the rewards – holiday, the car, [he’d ask] what colour car? – to make them have more chance of success because they were less nervous. Because if they start getting nervous, one bead of sweat, one tremble of the hand, and they’ll stand out, they’ll get busted, he’ll lose a horse and he’ll lose all the drugs and the potential money and they’ll go to jail. And none of them like losing horses. They felt guilty, for a little while.”

There are photographs of the players, some of which Bonella took, including the Bali Nine playing tennis.

“I spent a lot of time researching the photos because they are useful to confirm the facts that you’re writing,” she says. “There were some people I couldn’t [use photos of]. I had good photos of them and if I had used their photos there was a fair chance they could have been picked up by the cops. The only thing I changed was some names.”

I ask Bonella if she ever felt her safety was under threat. “I had a couple of moments, but generally no,” she says. “I’m conscious of the fact that it’s a serious game, the drug business, where there’s a lot of money to be made or lost and lives are on the line, especially in Indonesia, which has the death sentence and long [jail] sentences. If someone thought I was going to get them in trouble with the law I’d have to watch over my shoulder.”

Bonella grew up in Melbourne’s south-east near Berwick. Her family had racehorses and her father was a trainer. She was into long-distance running and trained every night with her father, Rod Bonella, who was a Commonwealth Games bronze medalist in the 1962 marathon.

She was sports captain at school, and Victorian schoolgirls cross country champion three years running – in years 10, 11, 12. She studied journalism at RMIT and lived in London for a few years. “I always had an inquisitive mind,” she says. “I always asked a million questions and found people and their stories hugely intriguing.”

In 2000 she joined *60 Minutes* as a producer, leaving in 2005 to write the Corby book.

Bali has played a big part in her life. “I float around, a bit of a gypsy, I always have been,” she says. “Travel is my addiction. I love different cultures, I love asking questions, I love learning stuff, seeing new stuff.”

Her boyfriend of seven years is a Sydney-based journalist. She mentions she may move to London and she’d like to write a book in Brazil. She’s sweating on her next topic and has to be deeply committed to the idea.

“Writing a book is a huge commitment,” she says. “It’s like living in a bubble, almost in that world, for almost two years. It’s like cutting off the rest of my life and living in that drug-dealer world.

“My heart and soul is in these books.”

pwilmoth@theweeklyreview.com.au

» www.kathrynbonella.com

WE WELCOME YOUR FEEDBACK @ www.theweeklyreview.com.au/interview

BALI HIGH

INTERVIEW \ KATHRYN BONELLA HAS PROBED THE UNDERBELLY OF A PARADISE, WRITES PETER WILMOTH

mules, the sleazy glamour that illegal money brings drug bosses, and the young women attracted to this world.

Bonella heard hundreds of stories and ensured they were cross-checked with newspaper reports. “My books are journalism,” she says. “I put a huge amount of research into (them) and make them accurate and authentic. That’s why I think the drug bosses were happy to talk to me for *Snowing*, because they’d read *Hotel K* and knew it was accurate. It was a golden key to opening up the world of the drug dealers.”

Bonella first came to Bali for work in April 2003, accompanying several survivors of the Bali bombing with reporter Liz Hayes to produce a story for Channel Nine’s *60 Minutes*. It was the survivors’ first time back after the October 2002 bombing in Kuta.

She returned in November 2004 to produce a story about Schapelle Corby a few weeks after Corby’s arrest for drug smuggling. It was Corby’s first feature interview. Bonella stayed in touch with the family and returned for the sentencing in May 2005 as producer for another report.

Six months later she was back, visiting Corby in Kerobokan for several hours a day to piece together her autobiography. *My Story* was released in 2006.

“It was quite daunting the first time I went into Hotel K,” Bonella says. “I’d done stories in my career in England with a killer, going into British jails, but going into a Third-World Balinese jail was daunting.

“During the course of doing that book I saw some bizarre, crazy things going on. I met lots of prisoners, many of the Bali Nine, and spent a lot of time chatting to them.”

The jail intrigued her. With its tennis court, gardens,

partially it alleviated their boredom to have a visit from me, someone who was very interested in listening to them,” she says. “Also I think they understood how bizarre and berserk the stories were. It was something to do. Was it an ego thing for those guys? Maybe a little bit. People liked to tell you stories.”

Rafael, the main character in *Snowing in Bali*, helped Bonella unlock this world. “He was a charismatic surfer who got pulled into the world of being a mule and then getting others to do the work,” she says. “It was a glamorous world; nights in villas with drugs and sex.

“I spoke to a guy, Andre, who was a fugitive and a friend of Rafael. He’d read *Hotel K* and they knew some of the people in it. So they knew I wasn’t an undercover cop, which was vitally important to them. They liked *Hotel K*. One of the guys photocopied it and passed it around. They knew it was accurate. This fugitive was one of the early ones who was prepared to talk to me and he was friends with Rafael, who agreed to meet me.

“At first [Rafael] was a little bit cagey. We got along well. As we continued to talk he opened up more and more.” She transcribed 300,000 words from interviews with Rafael. “We spent day after day, long days. He saw it as a job in the end.”

She says that after his time in jail, Rafael quit drug trafficking. “Part of the reason [he did the interviews] was to show young surfers you might have the glamorous life, you might have all the sex, all the girls, all the money, all the jewellery, all the travel, all the excitement and all the drugs you want but, ultimately, you end up dead, in the hospital or in jail,” she says.

Winning the confidence of the drug dealers gave Bonella extraordinary detail of their world. “The drug



Snowing in Bali by Kathryn Bonella
» \$34.99

Inquisitive: Kathryn Bonella spent two years in Bali gathering true stories about the drug business.