

From artist to children's author: Fiona Clarke



“When I was growing up, the only children’s books were fairytales or stories about a big ship and a fella called Captain Cook”. Portrait of Fiona Clarke by Warrnambool photographer [John \(Jack Wilkins\)](#).

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] W[/dropcap]hen **Fiona Clarke** was a little girl growing up in the 60s, most picture books were either British, based on fairytales, or about “a big ship and a fella called Captain Cook”.

“And Dr Seuss – he was good, I liked him,” Fiona says, laughing.

There were certainly very few children's books that told stories from Aboriginal culture and none that reflected Fiona's heritage as part of the Kirrae Whurrong clan in South-West Victoria.

In the second half of her life, Fiona has found herself at the forefront of changing all that, having published her first children's book in late 2012 and starting work on a second.



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As an established visual artist, Fiona, who lives in Merrivale, is best known for her paintings, sculptures and tapestries, but she is now bringing her storytelling and fine artistic ability together through books.

"It was something that I always wanted to do, but I didn't know where to start, like how to find a publisher when they all say 'no'," she says.



Fiona in her studio (aka the kitchen table) with copies of her first book, *Minkgill Chases the Rainbow*, and the blank canvas for her second book that is based around the rainbow serpent.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] E [/dropcap]arly-childhood educator **Claire Jennings** became the bridge between Fiona's talent and the publishing world and persuaded her to write and illustrate *Minkgill Chases the Rainbow*, published by One Day Hill (which has also published work by **Derek Guille**, **Shane Howard** and **Archie Roach**).

Minkgill is the Kirrae Whurrong word for "star" which she discovered after Shane Howard and her late brother, Ian, individually insisted that she read the classic book about Aboriginal culture in South-West Victoria by James Dawson, first published in 1881.

Shortly after the book was published, Fiona embarked on a series of storytelling workshops around Warrnambool and Melbourne, where she was met with a rapturous response by her young audience.

At the end of one storytelling session, a little girl approached Fiona and, with her hands across her heart, declared it was “the best story I’ve heard in my whole life!”



The artist becomes the subject: a portrait of Fiona by the late Brian Dunlop (1938-2009), *Sundown, Sunrise*, 1993. Image: [Culture Victoria](#) and the [Warrnambool Art Gallery](#).

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T [/dropcap]his time, the inspiration for Fiona’s second book has come from her great-niece, **Meekah Merriman**, who is just starting to read. Fiona tells a story about how Meekah walked up to her mother, lifted her shirt to show her rainbow-coloured *Dora the Explorer* belt, and said “the rainbow serpent is coming”.

That simple sentence settled in Fiona’s mind and she began to pen a story around the title.

“*The Rainbow Serpent is Coming* has come out as an environmental story, about the land and how we are treating

the land,” she says.

With the writing almost finished, Fiona is turning her mind to the illustrations that need to be painted for each page. A blank canvas – literally – is spread out on her kitchen table, which she uses as a studio.

It is a space she shares with her teenage daughter, **Patricia**, who is a keen artist, and her husband **Ken McKean**, whom she first met as a five or six year old after talking about the “walking fish” in his parent’s pet shop; they have been married more than 30 years.



Fiona's father, the late Banjo (Henry) Clarke as a young man. He continues to inspire Fiona's creative work, including her

decision to write books for
children.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] F [/dropcap]iona's birth family also continues to have a pervasive influence on her work.

As the youngest of six children born to the late Audrey and "Banjo" (Henry) Clarke, a respected elder of the Kirrae Whurrong, Fiona grew up surrounded by the energy and chatter of a large family.

"My father loved children," she says.

"He always loved to hear the sound of the children's laughter and said how much he missed hearing that when they were gone, grown up and moved away."

Fiona tells how Banjo often described children's laughter as "bringing colour to the world".

"They bring brightness to the world and Dad always talked about that, right up until the day he died, actually.

"This is why the pictures in my books are always bright – not too much earthy brown stuff," she laughs.

[box] **Fiona recently completed a mural, with Bronwyn Ferguson, at the entrance to Warrnambool College. You can find out more about Fiona's artwork on her website [here](#) and see her talk [about her work here](#). *Minkgill Chases the Rainbow* is available through Warrnambool Books.** [/box]

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Funky bar brings life back to dead alley



The genius behind Coffin Sally's pizza and bar in Port Fairy is the combined talents of Trent

Eggington and Peter Charlton.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap]t was fog-breath freezing and pouring with rain when *Bluestone* first discovered **Coffin Sally's** bar which, theoretically, should have been as dead as a doornail, given the weather.

Instead this little slice of Fitzroy in Port Fairy was packed with people warming themselves by a roaring fire in an old bluestone fireplace that was built for just such nights, while owners **Peter Charlton** and **Trent Eggington** and their fleet-footed staff kept the wine flowing and the pizza coming.

It was like stepping into a party to which everyone was invited and everyone was relaxed, not least of all Peter and Trent who, in their own words, are living the dream.

The pair became friends about seven years ago after working together in pizza shops in Lorne, and – like most of us who work for others – dreamt of some day owning their own business that, in their case, would centre around a gourmet pizza bar.

Peter, who grew up in NSW, is a chef and Trent, from Melbourne, has three years' training as an architect which has given him a keen eye for what works with interior design. Aside from an appreciation for good food and aesthetics, however, the pair also share a passion for surfing.

"We spent about two years looking for the right place, the right building, that was also by the beach," Peter explains.



Trent's background in training as an architect has created a space that is as quirky as it is warm and inviting.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] The pair originally headed east from Lorne, investigating shops around the Port Arlinton area, before deciding to check out Port Fairy and finding not only fantastic surf, but the perfect, vacant building – although it didn't look perfect at the time.

"When we first saw this place, the walls in the whole back area were covered right up to the roof," Peter says of the thick bluestone walls that date back to the 1840s.

Peter and Trent took the plunge and started their gourmet pizza business at the front of the shop in 2012 which – with its retro interior, cool music and chilled, expert staff (some hail from Cookie and The Toff, in Melbourne) – set the tone for what was to come.

"It is the first time we have ever done anything like this, so we are still learning, but there has been a slow evolution and things have just grown and unfolded organically," Trent explains.

After developing a loyal following through their pizzas, Trent and Peter expanded by renovating the middle of the building to create a cosy bar that serves boutique beers and interesting wines and added a separate dining room at the rear that, through clever design, looks like it has been there forever.

"I love old things," Trent says of his interior design work that features exposed beams, candles piled with dripping wax and blanched animal skulls.

"I love wood and stone and earthy, recycled materials and because we didn't have much money, we have worked with what was here," he says.

What was there included the idea for a business name, with the back alley behind the shop known as Coffin Alley because it originally led to an undertakers. The boys simply added an 's'.



Surfing and small business come together for Trent and Peter who spent two years looking for the right location before deciding on Port Fairy.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] T [/dropcap]he bar opened in winter last year and, like the pizza shop before it, has become extraordinarily successful without one ounce of advertising, but simply word of mouth.

And the pair isn't finished yet. As part of their organic growth, they hope to eventually expand their kitchen and their menu while sticking to their philosophy of using only good quality produce.

"I think if you don't get too caught up in making money and just enjoy it, that is how we have taken each step so far," Peter says.

Besides, there is also surfing to be done.

Despite it being barely 10 degrees, Trent tells me that he, and his kelpie Anchovy, will be heading to the beach straight after our interview.

"It's a pretty good life," he laughs.



Candles burn well into the night
in the back bar...

[box type="bio"] **Coffin Sally is at 33 Sackville St, Port Fairy. Winter opening times are Wed-Sunday. Ph: (03) 5568 2618[/box]**

Council's racing hospitality bill hard to swallow



Revelations that the Warrnambool City Council spent \$17,000 on a corporate hospitality tent at the May Races are hard to digest. Image source: Source: Vince Caligiuri/Getty Images AsiaPac

OPINION

As Warrnambool ratepayers prepare to swallow a 5.5 per cent rate rise this year, revelations that the Warrnambool City Council spent \$17,000 on a hospitality tent at the May Races will be hard to digest.

A request by **Cr Peter Hulin** for more information about the council's marquee at the 2014 May Races has revealed that \$17,036 was spent on wining, dining and entertaining 90 guests.

The breakdown includes \$3762 for food, \$1489 for drinks, \$4950 for members reserve tickets and wristbands, \$6610 for the marquee (including staff, decorations, chairs etc) and \$225 for racebooks.

And the potential cost could have been as much as \$25,000, as

168 invitations were issued but only 90 accepted.

The WCC's policy on the event, which has been included in this week's meeting agenda, says the hospitality is intended to show the council's support for the May Racing Carnival, while also promoting the 142-year-old event to politicians, key bureaucrats and regional leaders.

It is also, apparently, a great place to do business: to discuss "strategic projects" (presumably in-between races), and to develop "organisation to organisation" relationships, whatever that might mean.



Just weeks before the WCC passed a budget that included a 5.5% rate rise, the wine was flowing in its corporate hospitality tent at the May Racing Carnival.

I don't know if you received an invitation to the marquee , but those who did included:

- **24** members of council and their partners (including each councillor, the CEO, Mayor and directors);
- **12** state and federal MPs,
- **9** senior government bureaucrats,
- **65** regional leaders (including South Coast Board members, Wannon Water executives, senior police, senior

health executives, the Deakin University Vice-Chancellor and South-West TAFE CEO);

- and two of **Cr Brian Kelson's** business associates.

Another 56 people described as “groups and individuals working closely with council” were also extended the opportunity to enjoy a day by the track.

This group included representatives of [Maddocks Lawyers](#), a Melbourne-based legal firm that describes itself as one of the top 20 law firms in Australia and who, presumably, represents the council. I am not sure why top-of-the-town lawyers need to be wined and dined as part of developing “organisation to organisation” relationships.

This final group also included the President of [Commerce Warrnambool](#), a position currently held by **Tony Herbert**.

I find this intriguing for two reasons: first, that Commerce Warrnambool – at the time of the May Race Carnival – was deep in discussions with the council about its proposal to hit traders with [a new compulsory levy to raise \\$3 million over five years](#) to fund its activities. Indeed, the motion to set the levy in train was passed by the council just a fortnight later.

Being invited into the WCC hospitality marquee in the lead-up to that decision is the sort of access that traders fighting against the levy can only dream about.

Second, Commerce Warrnambool has argued that it needs funds from the levy to, among other things, act as a lobby group to council, but it appears that it is already well and truly “inside the tent”.



We don't know, as yet, who actually made up the 90 people who attended the marquee and if they included Mr Herbert, who yesterday declined to say whether he accepted the invitation or not, or Cr Kelson's two unnamed business associates.

But what we do know is that such corporate largesse is difficult to justify when so many people in the south-west are struggling to make ends meet.

And it is even harder to justify when rates are rising at almost double the rate of inflation and double the interest rate on most savings accounts.

Wining and dining has long been a part of how business operates, but we are not talking here about a commercial company like Coles, or Telstra or McDonalds: we are talking about a local council that has *you* as its shareholders (ratepayers) and which should be leading by example.

I find this sort of corporate partying (aka "networking") particularly galling when, at the same time as the council's guests are sipping champagne and nibbling on canapes, there are literacy programs, arts projects, history projects, health

projects, environmental projects and many other small, but important community projects all struggling to secure funding from an ever-shrinking pool.

While it must be easy to lose perspective when you are dealing with tens of millions of dollars, as the council does, to each and every one of these community projects, \$17,000 is still a lot of money.

No doubt those people who attended the race day had a marvellous time and perhaps even came away feeling a little more connected, inspired and ready to do business with the council, if they weren't already.

But to me, the corporate marquee revelations are cause for a very bad case of indigestion.

Trader levy shaping up for legal showdown



The proposed Warrnambool traders levy is heading for legal action unless it is withdrawn by the council at its meeting next Monday.

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]P[/dropcap]lans to hit traders with a compulsory levy to raise \$3 million over five years for [Commerce Warrnambool](#) are headed for court unless the Warrnambool City Council puts a stop to the levy immediately.

Commerce Warrnambool and the [Warrnambool Traders Action Group](#) agreed to not talk publicly about the levy while negotiations were underway between the two, but don't think for a moment they have struck a deal.

In fact, it is the opposite.

In a hard-hitting letter sent to all councillors and council Chief Executive Officer Bruce Anson last week, the traders are asking the council to withdraw the levy proposal at its meeting next Monday (21/7), or it will take legal action

against Commerce Warrnambool to prevent it from acting outside its legal powers.

The first step in that process is an injunction issued by the Magistrates' Court.

Before delivering this ultimatum out of sheer exasperation, the W'bool Traders Action Group spent a lot of time identifying where it believes Commerce Warrnambool has breached its legal requirements as an incorporated body and hoped that something would be done to address these concerns.

It also, despite weeks of discussion between the two groups, is still waiting for answers to its questions about how the levy has been justified.

It appears the traders have finally run out patience.



The Warrnambool Traders Action Group has questioned how many “head offices” of major businesses have verbally supported the levy idea.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]W[/dropcap]ith their gloves firmly off, the traders have, in their letter, accused

Commerce Warrnambool of making “false and misleading” claims about the level of support for the levy, which would raise \$600,000 in its first year and rise by 5 per cent each year.

In arguing why the levy should go ahead, Commerce Warrnambool said its consultant, Peter McNabb, had visited more than 900 businesses to explain how the levy would work and that this resulted in signed support from more than 150 traders.

The W’bool Traders Action Group says it has since spoken to more than 300 businesses and found less than 20 who were formally consulted: most found out about the levy through the media.

(As an aside, *Bluestone* asked the council if it had seen the 150 signed forms of support and was told that they had been “viewed by council staff”, but presumably not the elected councillors.)

Similarly, Commerce Warrnambool said its consultant received verbal support (ie. via telephone) from 150 corporate businesses who have their head offices outside of Warrnambool – a claim the traders describe as “fanciful” because finding the right person to speak to in corporations is difficult, let alone gaining their “verbal support” for anything.

And it doesn’t stop there.



[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]T[/dropcap>he Traders Action Group goes on to reveal in its letter that the “purpose” of the Commerce Warrnambool Strategic Business Plan – as stated

in the business plan – is actually the “purpose” of the Swan Hill Incorporated plan (which Peter McNabb and Associates also developed) and has nothing to do with the objectives of Commerce Warrnambool.

There are also allegations of threatening, potentially libelous emails being sent from a member of Commerce Warrnambool to two members of the Traders Action Group.

Put simply, the levy proposal is a mess and, as a result, Commerce Warrnambool is in a mess.

This is a shame, because the city *needs* a robust Chamber of Commerce – something the W’bool Traders Action Group also agrees on – but how that body is funded, and what it does, needs more investigation and discussion.

I have [written previously](#) about how chambers of commerce in other regional cities use memberships and corporate sponsorships to survive and how they are primarily focussed on lobbying, networking and professional development: not things like Christmas decorations, ‘buy local’ campaigns and promoting the local football finals.



*To stop the proposed
Commerce Warrnambool
levy*

*You must **OBJECT***

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]I[/dropcap]n addition, we still don’t know – if the levy was to go through – what Commerce Warrnambool will deliver in its first year, beyond some very broad-brush goals that require a huge leap of faith that the \$600,000 will be well spent.

Our elected officials have an opportunity, next Monday, to put the brakes on the whole levy proposal and Commerce Warrnambool has an opportunity to start over, with a view to building a robust plan for its future that has solid – rather than fractured – support.

The most likely result, however, is that the council will vote to defer the levy process until later in the year, which really helps neither side and only extends the war.

The council might prefer to stay in limbo, but the traders have made it clear that they will not.

This time, time has run out.

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Traders levy takes a new twist



The traders levy for Warrnambool has taken a twist, with a proposal that half of the cost be shifted to general council funds.

OPINION – CAROL ALTMANN

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] P [/dropcap]lans to [introduce a new trader levy](#) to raise \$3 million over five years for Commerce Warrnambool have taken a dramatic twist.

A Facebook post by Commerce Warrnambool (CW) president Tony Herbert has revealed that CW is no longer seeking \$600,000 a year from the trader levy, but \$300,000 – with the remaining \$300,000 to come straight from the Warrnambool City Council coffers.

This new idea is central to the negotiations between CW and the Warrnambool Traders Action Group – with Mayor Michael Neoh sitting in the middle – to try and reach a compromise, after the initial levy proposal sparked an angry and rolling protest.

It might look like an attempt at a compromise, but to me it sounds like policy on the run and former Labor leader Kevin Rudd is living proof of where that can lead: disaster.

Commerce Warrnambool no doubt has noble intentions in trying to raise funds to spend on promoting Warrnambool, but its proposals continue to raise more questions than they answer.

Shifting half of the cost burden from traders to general ratepayers does not change the need for a full and robust discussion on *how* the funds will be spent.

It also raises the question of whether this is the best use of \$1.5 million of public funds. (Especially when the council is already spending close to \$1 million a year on propping up Fun4Kids and Flagstaff Hill).

Indeed this new idea, if it is accepted, only widens the discussion – from traders to the general community – and we should now *all* be invited to have a say.

Bluestone Magazine is not alone in its concerns.



Mayor Michael Neoh is in the middle of the negotiations between angry traders and Commerce Warrnambool.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] A [dropcap]s it so happens, not only did we stumble across Mr Herbert's Facebook post today, but the council sent us a wad of documents in response to a Freedom of Information request we lodged in late May regarding the levy.

We are still working our way through these documents and will reveal more over time, but email correspondence between the council's Director of City Growth, Bill Millard, and Commerce Warrnambool as recently as April this year indicates that both councillors and Council Chief Executive Officer Bruce Anson wanted to see much more detail on how the first \$600,000 would be spent.

"I think one of the things you guys do need to work on is

answering the question that Bruce asked Richard (Montgomery, from CW) ie. what is the \$600k going to be spent on in year one, remembering that council needs to sign on to the quantum and the KPIs," Mr Millard wrote on March 6.

"Personally, I think you need to be definitive here. It will hurt your overall push if the councillors don't know what the money will be spent on."

You were not wrong there, Bill!

Mr Millard wrote another email dated April 1 – just weeks before the levy process was approved by the council – indicating councillors were still seeking critical details.

The email is too long to reproduce in full here, but it summarises the questions from councillors, including, again, the need for some firm details on how the money will be spent in the first year, how Commerce Warrnambool decided on the figure of \$600,000 as an annual total, and what was the level of support for the levy among traders.

I would strongly argue that these questions still stand.



[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap] spoke to Mr Herbert today and he said he was hopeful of reaching some middle ground, although he did not wish to go into any further detail because the negotiations were at a critical stage.

"Members of Commerce Warrnambool and Warrnambool Traders

Action Group are working together with the council to try and get an outcome that is hopefully more suitable," he said.

The trader action group has put forward a compromise of their own which, I understand, has already been knocked on the head by Commerce Warrnambool.

Their suggestion was to withdraw the levy proposal, have key members of the action group join the Commerce Warrnambool board and start from scratch as a united group.

This united group would review the business plan, look at how other towns run their Chambers of Commerce and come up with a fresh approach to council by November.

Perhaps that would provide the breathing space that this whole messy proposal so desperately needs.

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