A love story built on literary lives

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Wendy and Allan Scarfe will next year celebrate their 60th anniversary…and a literary partnership that has created more than 26 books.

Words and photos by Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="color:#A5CECD;"] T [/dropcap]o spend time with authors **Allan** and **Wendy Scarfe** is to experience the lovely ease that comes when two people have shared their lives together, on the same path, creating works that will last beyond their lifetimes.

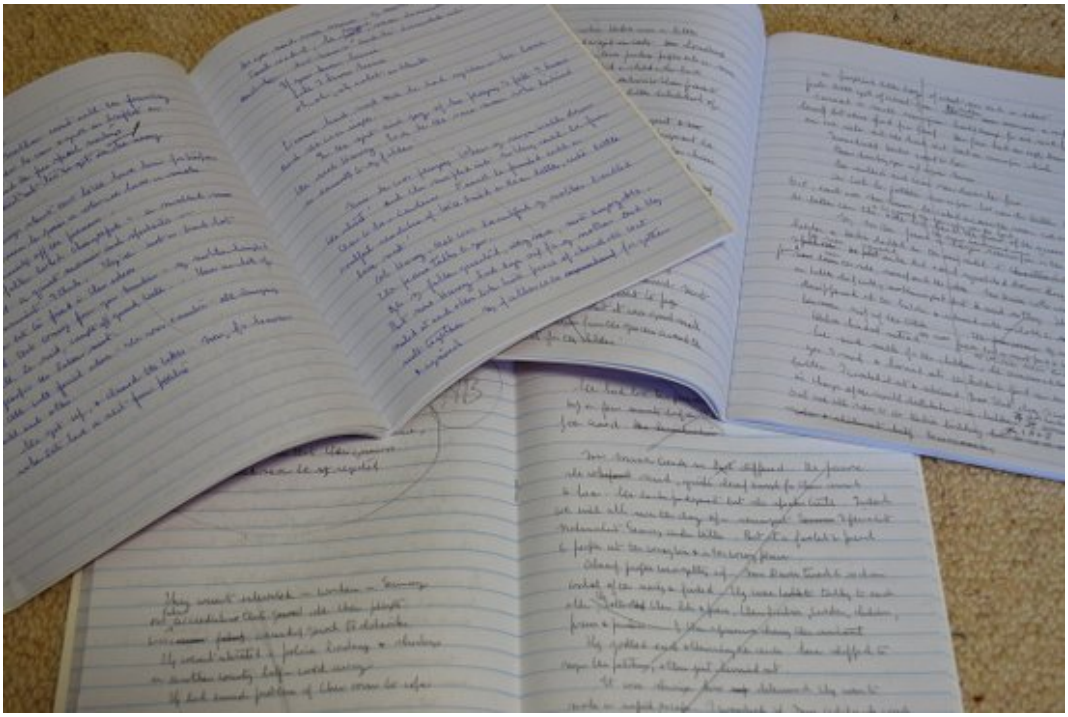
The Warrnambool couple, now aged in their 80s, have between them produced 26 books and are currently working on bringing Wendy's latest – and probably last – novel to life: a political and romantic thriller, ***Hunger Town***, that will be

published later this year.

While Wendy has spent the past three years coaxing the novel out of a mash of ideas into a fully formed manuscript of 145,000 words, *Hunger Town*, like all of the Scarfes' work, is very much a joint production.

Over tea and warm biscuits (baked by Allan) in a home crammed with books and art, Wendy outlines the thrust of her new work – more about that shortly – while Allan drops in an extra detail or two about the plot or the main characters. It is a story he knows very well because he has read – and typed – every word.

"I don't use a computer to write," Wendy explains, "or a typewriter".



Where it all begins: Wendy Scarfe writes her books longhand, in exercise books, after which Allan transcribes them on to computer.

[dropcap style=”color:#A5CECD;”] I [/dropcap]nstead, *Hunger Town* was drafted by Wendy in long-hand, using exercise books bought from the local supermarket. Each book, and there is a box full, is crammed with notes, word lists and page after page of neat cursive script. There are no chapters, but rather a collection of scenes that are then pieced together.

“I have always written this way, where I use line breaks to move through scenes. I find this much better than creating self-contained capsules,” Wendy says.

“I am just lucky that Allan is a very good and patient typist,” she adds with a laugh.

The Scarfes’ is a relationship that spans 60 years (they met at Melbourne University and married in 1955), four children, and joint careers as secondary school teachers of English and English literature, including seminal years working in impoverished communities in India.

Given their life experiences, the Scarfes use their writing to expose the reader to deeper issues than those found in an average airport paperback: social justice, equality, oppression, feminism, political activism and the impact of conflict, are common themes.

“I have always been a political person, but not a party political person,” Wendy says.

“I am more interested in the actual political systems and how people are affected by them.”

A young Wendy at the time of her marriage to Allan in 1955.

[dropcap style=”color: #A5CECD;”] N[/dropcap]ot surprisingly, an exploration of politics also underpins *Hunger Town,* which is set in the Great Depression and centres around the story of a fictional character, Judith Larson. Judith is raised on a hulk on the Port River, at Port Adelaide, and her life as a young adult traverses the tumultuous political events happening in Australia and overseas during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

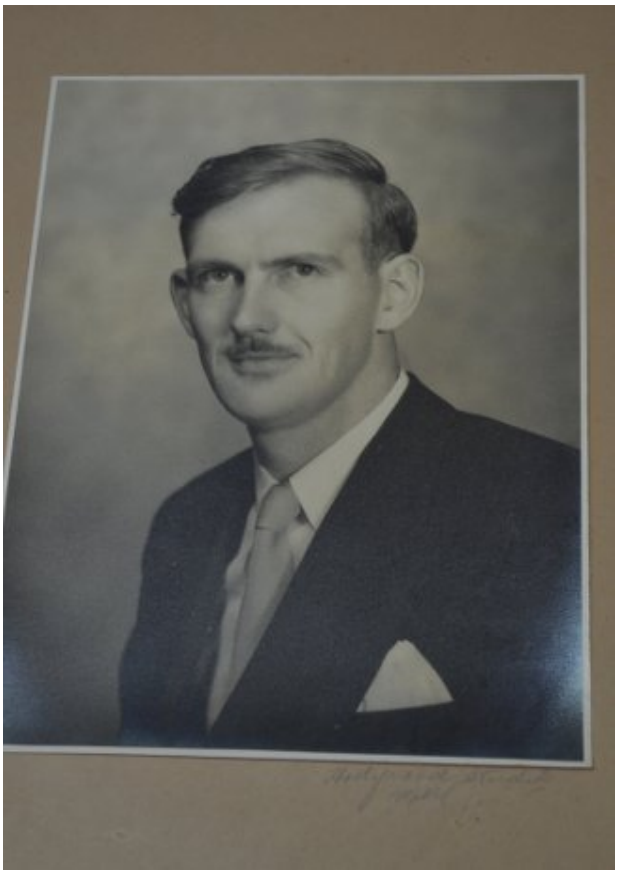
It is a novel that promises to be intellectually satisfying and a heart-racing read, particularly as Judith embarks on a frantic search for her husband who goes missing in Spain after becoming caught up in the brutality of fascism. Those who have read Wendy’s manuscript say it is impossible to put down.

Hunger Town is shaping up to be one of the Scarfes’ most commercially successful works since *A Mouthful of Petals: The*

Story of an Indian Village, which was first published in 1967, re-printed in 2011, and now also available as an e-book.

On the subject of e-books, Allan is pleased to point out that the Scarfes have embraced the digital age and created a Wikipedia page for Wendy, but unfortunately not one for himself.

“There were already three Alan/Allan John Scarfes – a Canadian actor, a bishop in Iowa and a clergyman in Middle England – and they didn’t have room for one more,” he laughs.



Allan also had a touch of Hollywood about him as a younger man, but fortunately it was words, not film, that sparked his creativity.

[dropcap style=”color: #A5CECD;”] T [/dropcap]he Scarfes do, however, have a website that captures the full breadth of their output over the past 40-plus years and is illustrated by

nature photographs taken by daughter, Nalini.

So will *Hunger Town* be Wendy's last novel, as she has been suggesting?

"There are always more ideas, so many ideas, but it is a lot of hard work to produce a book out of those ideas," she says.

Will we take that as a "not sure"? Let's hope so.

[box] ***Hunger Town*, Wakefield Press, should be published by November and will be available from local book specialists, Warrnambool Books.**[/box]

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