

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE2883

Masters, Olga

(1919 - 1986)

Born 19190528, Pambula New South Wales Australia

Died 19860927, Wollongong New South Wales Australia

Occupation Journalist, Print journalist, Writer

Summary

Olga Masters began work as a journalist aged fifteen. Her passion was for human interest stories over and above the drama of front page news. Over the course of her thirty-year career in journalism, Masters also produced three novels, several unpublished plays, and two collections of short fiction. She won nine prizes for her short fiction including the prestigious award of the South Pacific Association for the Study of Language and Literature, shared with Elizabeth Jolley. Masters' first collection of stories, *The Home Girls*, was published in 1982 when she was 63 years old, and won a National Book Council award.

Details

Olga Masters was raised on the southern coast of New South Wales, between Bega and Moruya. She left school early to help at home, and took on a cadetship with the *Cobargo Chronicle*. In 1937 she moved to Sydney, where she worked as a shorthand typist and copywriter in advertising for radio. She married schoolteacher Charles Masters in 1940, and, while raising her seven children, lived in a number of small towns in New South Wales. In Lismore she worked as district correspondent for the *Northern Star*. In the mid-1960s, Masters returned to Sydney. With her children grown, she recommenced her journalistic work in earnest, writing for the *St George and Southerland Shire Leader* (1966-1969), *Liverpool-Fairfield Champion* (1968-1971), *Land* (1969-1971), *Manly Daily* (1971-1977, then 1979-1983), and *Sydney Morning Herald* (1984-1986). In 1983, she received a grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council which allowed her to venture further into fiction writing in the last years of her life.

Masters was fascinated by the study of human nature and derived most enjoyment from writing about people and organisations: weddings, births, deaths, fundraising events, sports days, community groups, concerts. Her biographer, Deirdre Coleman, notes that Masters lived through a time of dramatic change in the structure and dynamic of the Australian family: 'the lives of women past and present, within the home and outside it, form the principal subject matter of much of her journalism and fiction'.

At the *Herald*, Masters was employed to write the regular 'Style' column for women. Here she broadened her scope, discussing everything from writing, reading, art, housekeeping, fashion, etiquette, domestic economy and family dynamics, to the role of women in wartime. Masters used the column to observe, to reflect, and to provoke. With her trademark irony and dry humour she produced a number of pieces on the unjust lot of women including 'Never fear, housewives – he's here', and 'Don't forget, mothers are human beings too': 'If you read every book on child bearing and rearing from any that came out with the First Fleet through Doctor Spock to the new ones like *Making Love After Birth*', wrote Masters in September 1985, 'nowhere will you find it stated that part of a woman's brain comes away with the afterbirth'. In her August 1985 column, 'War gave women a first taste of liberation', Masters noted: 'It is true that war shapes our lives. Perhaps truer to say it reshapes them. Truer perhaps of women than men'. She reflected on the change in women since the Second World War:

Not only were we [women] naïve by today's standards, but downright ignorant. Jogging was something we did when the butcher was selling sausages without asking for meat coupons. Heroin would have sounded like the name of a bird. We never knew of a child dying of cancer. The pill was taken for constipation. Gay was the way we felt most of the time, even while twenty-two thousand Australian men and women were prisoners of the Japanese.

Olga Masters' reporting displayed a sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of ordinary people. According to her son, Chris Masters, her career began 'not when her first book was published, but when she started taking an interest in her neighbours'. She died in 1986, aged 67.

Events

1934 - 1986

Career in journalism active

Published resources

Edited Book

Olga Masters Reporting Home: Her writings as a journalist, Coleman, Deirdre, 1990

Site Exhibition

The Women's Pages: Australian Women and Journalism since 1850, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2008, <http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cal/cal-home.html>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details

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