



THE BOOK CLUB

WITH
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Danger always at hand in Outback life

TITLE: McAllister
Author: Jenny Old
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JENNY Old looks every inch the kind and caring grandma and former nurse who was educated at a prestigious young ladies college in a big city. She's certainly that, but looks can be deceiving.

She has also handled guns and says she would have had no hesitation in using one to protect her kids when she and her family lived on an isolated cattle station in the Gulf.

Jenny spent 18 years as a modern-day pioneer, carving out a life in the bush on that remote property with her husband Rick. She had to be all things to all people – loving wife and best friend to her husband, a mum to her boys, a cook for the family and workers, medic, gardener, homestead manager and standby stockman.

So beneath that gentle exterior now as a typical Gold Coast woman who dresses for the beach and loves a coffee on the Isle of Capri, she's tough.

And when Jenny says she would have used a gun if her boys were ever seriously threatened, she means it. A couple of wild young thugs come to mind when she says that, along with another drunken troublemaker who could have burned the homestead down.

"There were a lot of tough times and a lot of unpleasant times, particularly with the staff," Jenny said this week of those 18 years on a remote, isolated property called McAllister station, where the nearest neighbour lived 40km away.

"We didn't have a permanent staff, we only had them for the mustering season, so you just didn't know where these people came from and there were some, ah, some



McAllister author Jenny Old and husband Rick Old talking about their days in the bush which Jenny used as the basis for her new book.

Picture: JERAD WILLIAMS

scary people among them."

In her new book, *McAllister*, Jenny tells the story of how as a 22-year-old bride she went to live and work with Rick on his 60,000ha property south of Normanton, and how they built the property up despite drought, flood, fire, cyclones and the Wet, which could leave them isolated for up to five months at a time.

The book cover features an

old photo of her riding a frisky young mare the couple called Stacka – short for Stack of Fun.

Her brow furrowed as she recalled how a couple of young drifters worked briefly on the station during a mustering season when the Olds' two boys, Anthony and Ben, were aged 8 and 4.

The workers, aged around 18, were trouble.

The family used to swim

regularly on one of the dams on the property, and were often joined by a pelican they called Mr Percival, named after the bird in Colin Thiele's famous children's book, *Storm Boy*.

"We went out one evening to have a swim and he'd been shot. These rotten kids had obviously shot him. Rick sacked them," she said.

"After they'd gone, the

other men said they'd heard them talking, saying they 'might shoot Jen and the boys when Rick's not there'.

"You just didn't quite know what their history was. All these criminals go north.

"There were guns on the property. They would have been accessible (to them). We had guns for wild pigs, dingoes. Of course they weren't all locked up then. You carried

one in the vehicle for wild pigs, or if you saw a beast had been injured and was in pain, you shot it.

"When Rick wasn't there I had occasions when the men would get on the grog. I had one guy throwing matches in the house (trying) to burn the house down, so I always had a gun and I absolutely wouldn't have hesitated to use it if they'd come in and threatened

my children." Rick owned a pistol and had a licence for it. The police in Normanton would drive out once a year to renew Rick's licence and have lunch.

"Every time the police came out, once a year in full uniform, the entire staff would disappear. You'd see this old cook rushing down and hiding in the creek, and think 'oh, what is their history'.

"We always had a dog. I had a dalmatian that was very protective and a doberman that was dumb, although I think in a challenge he would have reacted. They were challenging times, but I survived."

Jenny wrote the book at the urging of her mother and mother-in-law, who both kept all the letters she had written to them during the years the family spent on McAllister, which was more than 100km south of Normanton. The boys were born in Mount Isa and after being homeschooled by Jenny, went to boarding school in Toowoomba when they were older.

By the time Jenny had finished writing, her story of life on McAllister had become more than just a written record for the family.

"It's a piece of Australian history," she said.

"I wanted to stress the

women's role. I think it's a very understated, undervalued role, often by the women themselves.

"The women are teachers, cooks, they entertain. When the men are out in camp, it's the women and children who manage the homestead property, keeping water going for cattle, starting the generators for power, generally keeping things on track at home.

"They're also the nurse. They're the mediator with the staff. They're the gardener if they want to create an oasis, which I did.

"It's a multiple role. You're also the back-up stockman if you're short of staff."

Jenny was blunt on the matter of whether the men understood this.

"No," she said. "My husband didn't. We've been married for 47 years. I have no complaints, I'm very happy, but really until he read it he didn't understand my feelings and my side of it, and how difficult it was.

"A lot of the men, the genuine old bushies – it's just expected, and the women expect to do it. There's no drama there, but it highlighted to me that vital role and how demanding it is, emotionally and physically."

Jenny had grown up on an

irrigated property at Deniliquin in the Riverina. Her parents were successful farmers and sent their headstrong daughter to board at the Methodist Ladies College in Sydney.

Later she trained as a nurse and worked at the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne before taking off to explore the world.

She described herself as "the black sheep of the family", so it was probably inevitable she would meet and fall for another black sheep – Rick, the son from a family of lawyers who was schooled at exclusive Sydney grammar school Shore and then as a boarder at The Armidale School, before heading bush as soon as he finished school to become a jackaroo.

Rick's parents were concerned but backed him, giving him his early inheritance so he could use it to start life on a cattle property.

The money was used to buy his shareholding in McAllister, which the couple eventually took over when the rest of the shareholders pulled out as beef prices crashed and interest rates soared in the 1970s.

Jenny Old will launch her book, *McAllister*, in the Paradise Room at the Arts Centre Gold Coast at noon on August 24. Proceeds to aid Bannister House, for Gold Coast Homeless Youth.

Jacko, the bushie who saved Christmas

CHRISTMAS 1972 was shaping as a miserable time on remote McAllister station for Jenny and Rick Old and their little son, Anthony.

There are two seasons in the tropical north, The Wet and The Dry, and the rains that year had come with a vengeance, cutting the young family off from the rest of the world. They had no phone, the nearest neighbour was 40km away, it was stinking hot, the roads had been turned to mud and the creeks were running.

Jenny looked forward to the mail that arrived each week in good times, delivered by postal contractor Beryl who also had a taxi service in Normanton, about 110km away.

But the rains meant there had been no delivery for ages. Rick didn't mind not receiving bills, but Jenny was suffering withdrawals because she would write letters to everyone, particularly her mum and her mother-in-law each week, telling them all about her little son and life in the bush. And they would reply to her each week.

Christmas Day arrived. "We were sitting there trying to be festive, we had a baby too young for Christmas, no presents, no



Jenny Old arrives at McAllister after her honeymoon.

cards because we hadn't had mail, we were feeling a bit sorry for ourselves," Jenny said.

Then they heard a vehicle. A four-wheel-drive appeared, labouring through the slush and covered in mud. Out climbed a thin and wizened bushie, with missing teeth and as gruff as they come.

It was Beryl's husband Jacko, and with him were two bulging mail bags.

"I threw my arms around him and gave him a hug. He was so embarrassed but I know he loved it," Jenny said.

"I said it's Christmas Day and he said, 'Same bloody day as any other mail day'.

"But he knew we were on our own and he knew there were two big bulging mail bags there for us.

"I said come in and have a beer and he said 'I'm diabetic, no I have to get back before the river gets up, the roads are pretty messy'.

"I've never forgotten that. 'So we had Christmas Day with Christmas cards and presents. Isn't that amazing?'"

"That's the spirit of the bush."

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