

Spotlight On: Tina Allen



Our Spotlight On featured writer for April (2017) is Tina Allen, a Southern Highlands-based author who lives with her family on a farm near Berrima. Tina worked as a medical scientist at several Sydney teaching hospitals for ten years before becoming a freelance medical writer and editor in 1996. During the past twenty years she has written feature articles for GP magazines, such as *Australian Doctor*, reports for government on disability and most recently about mental health for a division of Ramsay Health Care. While president of the Australasian Medical Writers Association (AMWA) from 2005 to 2009, she judged many media awards for excellence in medical journalism.

In March this year, Tina published her first book, a biography entitled, *Bill Gibson: Pioneering bionic ear surgeon*. The last month has been a busy and exciting time for Tina with a series of book signings and launches as well as media appearances for both her and the subject of her biography, Professor Bill Gibson. Our membership intern Ren Arcamone spoke to Tina about her research process and why she wrote this biography.

Tell us a bit about your book *Bill Gibson: Pioneering bionic ear surgeon*. What inspired you to write this biography?

Bill Gibson was born during WWII while his father was away at the D-Day landings. From the age of five he knew that he wanted to be a doctor, like many members of his extended family. Inspiration while growing up in England came from stories of his father's role as a 'medic' during the war and the general practice he ran from their family home. Unlike some biographies which only include a few paragraphs or at most a chapter about the subject's childhood, I deliberately panned the camera slowly over Bill's formative years, which occupy the first two chapters of my book.

Accounts of Bill's childhood adventures in Devon with his identical twin brother display his initiative and high spirits, while anecdotes about his medical career in London suggest more of an absent-minded professor in search for a cure of that most disorientating and debilitating of maladies, Menière's disease. Bill left one of the top ENT consultant positions in the UK to emigrate with his family to Australia in 1983 to become the first professor of ENT at the University of Sydney.

The following year he operated on a 22-year-old woman who was the first person in NSW to receive the Australian-designed cochlear implant, or 'bionic ear' as its pioneer Professor Graeme Clark refers to the device. Three years later in 1987, Bill operated on a four-year-old girl who was the first paediatric recipient in the world of the bionic ear. My book recounts the difficult road ahead for Bill, who received harsh criticism from the Deaf community and also his own colleagues, for performing the operation on children, particularly those born deaf. Between 1984 and 2014, he performed the bionic ear operation more than 2000 times, making him one of the most prolific surgeons in his field.

I was commissioned to write the biography of Bill Gibson by the committee members of the Cochlear Implant Club and Advisory Association (CICADA) who were looking for a medical writer with the requisite experience to tell the story of his career and be able to explain how a cochlear implant works for a lay audience. Members of the club told me about Bill's dedication and his sense of humour, as well as his love of dressing up, which are traits not normally associated with a medical specialist. The committee didn't want the inspirational story of their surgeon to be forgotten.

You have a strong background in medical writing and editing. Were there any challenges in switching to a new writing style/genre, and if so, how did you overcome them?

Yes, for the last twenty years, I have been writing about health and medicine as well as editing books and reports. I would describe most of my previous writing as 'technical writing', so I knew when I started the biography that I would need some additional life-writing skills. I attended courses at the NSW Writer's Centre (NSWWC) in not only life writing, but also dialogue so I could use some of Bill's own words to assist readers to come to know him better. Other courses taught me how to write about the funny and also the sad times that affect all of us at some time or other.

I describe my writing style as creative non-fiction, because I have employed some of the techniques of a novelist to write the biography – including opening each chapter with a story and concluding with a hook to make readers want to turn the page. Naturally, I recently attended your Creative Non-fiction Festival, where I met many useful contacts.

How did you find a publisher?

I can attribute some of my success in finding a publisher to the NSWWC, because I count myself among the success stories from the Open House with HarperCollins, held at the centre in October 2015. The publishing proposal I submitted one month prior to the Open House included a 20-page writing sample from the first chapter of my book. When the non-fiction publisher at HarperCollins, Helen Littleton, told me that my sample was well-written, it was a huge confidence boost. I contacted both of the publishers Helen suggested and I was stunned when they both wanted to 'sell my book into the trade', or in other words publish my book for distribution to booksellers and libraries. It was a difficult decision, but after taking the advice of the Club who commissioned me to write the book, I chose NewSouth Books, one of the two publishing arms of the University of NSW.

Describe your research process. How does it shape the creative aspects of writing?

Research forms the backbone of non-fiction writing, but it can be very seductive when you start finding more and more interesting information about your subject matter online. The background information you absorb will assist you to write confidently about your subject; however, it is from your interviews with living people that you can add vitality to your biography and memoir writing.

When I first met Professor Gibson in 2009, he was already 65 years old, but he was so busy with his clinical and academic commitments that we only had snatches of time together before his first patient arrived for the day in his private rooms. It was just enough time for him to tell me an anecdote from his childhood, or to quote some lines from his favourite poet, Hilaire Belloc.

The glue to stitch these anecdotes together came from meeting Bill's sibling in Australia, Bob, and his elder sister, Eleanor, who lives in Northampton. On a trip to the UK in 2011, I also visited the home in Devon where Bill was born and walked around the estate where he grew up in Dawlish. Former medical colleagues in London, Cambridge and Manchester told me about his early medical training – and yes, they told me more funny stories.

Before starting this book, I had never met a deaf person. Now I have had the pleasure of meeting and/or interviewing 70 people with a hearing impairment. While the stories of only 40 appear in the book, all of them have helped me to gain an understanding of what it is like to be deaf and have a cochlear implant. By telling the stories of these patients, I was able to 'show not tell' how Bill Gibson is a caring medical practitioner.

As Bill gave up some of his clinical and academic responsibilities, we were able to have longer sessions together. My interviews with Bill in these later years were more like 'fireside chats' because he told me not only about his branch of medicine, but also about history and literature. Where possible I have woven these snippets into the tapestry of the book.

Do you have a regular writing routine? If so, what does it involve?

As a freelance medical writer, I am working for myself so I can theoretically set my own hours. However, I find that I am the most productive if I write at a desk in my husband's legal practice because there are fewer of the distractions of home and the farm at the office.

What is the best piece of writing advice you've been given?

No man is an island. Most, if not all, writers need to receive regular feedback during a writing project. This may be from a group of other emerging writers or someone with greater experience. Either way they will point out the ambiguities to you and when something is not working. I met a group of writers at your Centre who formed a group called the Triune Writers Group. The funny thing is that I am the only non-fantasy writer in the group but we still critique each other's work well. When they read my chapter about the first adults to receive the bionic ear in NSW and told me they didn't understand the technology behind the device, I knew I needed to work harder to reach my readership.

Later on you will need professional advice about whether your book is ready to submit to a publisher. It is important that this advice is from a completely unbiased person who has nothing to gain from telling you your writing is good and/or your manuscript is ready for submission.

Do you have any advice for emerging writers?

It is important to get your first draft written and not be too hard on yourself if the writing is pretty dreadful. When I look back at the first drafts of my book now, I can't believe how different they are from the words that appear on the pages of my published book. It was only when I found my voice and the perspective I wanted to write my book from that my style started to become more consistent

and the writing more professional. To help you reach that point, choose books from your genre that you believe to be well-written and then aim to emulate those writers. Also attend writing courses, like I did, to assist you to perfect your craft and inch closer and closer to the prose of those writers you admire.

What are you reading at the moment?

I am reading *Nobody Is Ever Missing* by a young US author, Catherine Lacey, about a woman who ran away from her marriage and husband to the south island of New Zealand. The book is written in an unconventional style, with her sentence lengths ranging from fragments of only two words to stream-of-consciousness passages of 260 words, or nearly a page. I remember one of my writing course instructors saying you can only break the rules of writing and grammar once you first convince your readers that you have a good grasp of the rules. I think this is true of Lacey's writing, which I find engaging.

In your opinion, who/what is the most inspiring...

Writer/Book?

I read a wide range of genres because I am in a book club with a great bunch of women. Some of my favourite authors and their books are Haruki Murakami (*South of the Border, West of the Sun*), Patricia Highsmith (*This Sweet Sickness*), Irene Némirovsky (*Fire in the Blood*) and Tracy Chevalier (*The Girl with a Pearl Earring*). The 'ageing rock star' actor from the film *Love Actually*, Bill Nighy, who was interviewed a few days ago by Leigh Sales on the *7.30 Report*, stated that he liked to read the complete *oeuvre* of his favourite authors, and I have certainly attempted to do so for those authors mentioned above.

Music?

My favourite compilations seem to be movie soundtracks at the moment and like many other authors, I prefer listening to instrumental music when I am writing. If I'm in a classical mood, I listen to *Sense and Sensibility* or if I am feeling like some French-inspired music, then *Something's Gotta Give*. The piano playing is very stirring in the *Intouchables*; a French movie with some original compositions by Ludovico Einaudi, who is also a favourite of one of your previously featured Spotlight On guests, Sarah Lambert.

Weather?

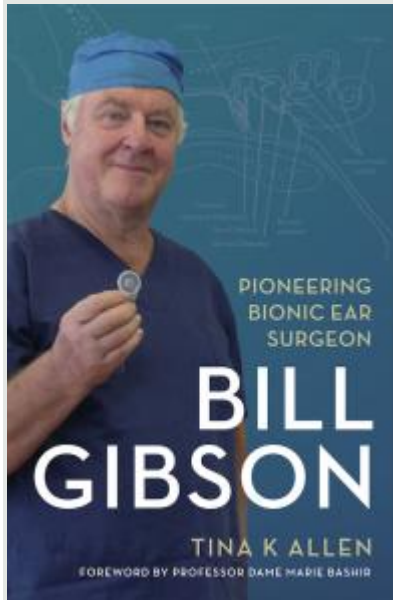
Although I like to keep warm while I am writing in front of a fire (or sometimes in bed) during our cold Southern Highlands winters, I prefer a fine spring or summer day when I can take a break from my writing to check on the produce in our vegetable garden or walk through our olive grove of 66 trees, which includes a mixture of Tuscan varieties and Kalamatas.

Location?

Believe it not; the shower and driving on the motorway between Sydney and the Southern Highlands are both inspirational locations for me. Ideas seem to flood into my brain, even though it isn't very easy to write them down. If I don't scrawl the ideas down quickly on a pad of paper, they just evaporate. In non-fiction writing you can end up with hundreds or even thousands of story fragments and inspiration will come to me about how to string them together into a flowing narrative so the 'joins' aren't so obvious and the writing appears more seamless. It doesn't matter if a book is fiction or non-fiction, the common aim for all authors is for readers of their books to become so

hooked in the story that they ask, 'What happened next?' The technical term for this is 'profluence', which a book club friend of mine told me sounds like what you experience the morning after a large curry and a few beers.

Follow Tina on Twitter [@tinakallen](https://twitter.com/tinakallen) and email her at tina.allen@bigpond.com.



The following is an excerpt from *Bill Gibson: Pioneering bionic ear surgeon*

Bill and Alex Gibson flew into Sydney in October 1983 and found a nation in a euphoric mood after winning the America's Cup yacht race. Replays of the dawn celebrations in Perth showed the recently elected prime minister Bob Hawke wearing a white jacket emblazoned all over with the word 'Australia'. When he stated on national television, 'Any boss who sacks anyone today for not turning up at work is a bum', Hawke certainly made a stark contrast for the new arrivals to Britain's 'Iron Lady', Margaret Thatcher.

It had been eleven years since Bill and his identical twin brother Bob had shared the camaraderie of both living in London and they had hardly met up during that time. Bill enjoyed the couple of months that he and Alex stayed with Bob and Jan in the north shore suburb of St Ives while he settled into his role as the inaugural Professor of Otolaryngology (study of ears and throats) at the University of Sydney. Bill and his brother still looked incredibly alike at thirty-nine, and he comments that one weekend when he picked up his seven-year-old niece Becky from a birthday party, 'nobody batted an eyelid that I wasn't her actual father'.

No one could have extended a warmer welcome or been a closer ally to Bill than the senior ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgeon, Barrie Scrivener, then in his mid-fifties. Scrivener hoped his younger colleague would carve out new directions for their specialty as the new head of the ENT Department at Royal Prince Alfred (RPA) – a teaching hospital co-located on the same site as the University of Sydney. Bill shared surgical lists with Scrivener in the operating theatres on level six of the hospital's Victorian pavilion building and saw patients in the ENT specialty ward on level eight.

Bill was pleased that he had been successful in securing the role of honorary consultant surgeon at the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children, known as the Children's Hospital, because this gave him access to a second hospital with facilities for performing hearing assessments and operations on children. The Children's Hospital was only a ten-minute walk from RPA down Missenden Road and across the other side of busy Parramatta Road. Bill had already met one of the visiting medical officers at the hospital, Henley Harrison, in London and they would now be performing operations on children together.

Bill hoped that this would include cochlear implant operations on children in the not too distant future. Considering that a cochlear implant program using the Australian-designed bionic ear was yet to be established in New South Wales, Bill was uncannily accurate when he predicted that 'by the Year 2000 there should be no such thing as a child born to a life of total deafness'. This quote is taken from an article he wrote for the *University of Sydney News* in December 1983, in which he also predicted that:

'Over the next few years I am sure there will be a tremendous surge in the early diagnosis of total deafness, which will be remedied by the 'cochlear implant' or 'bionic ear', creating sufficient sensation of sound for speech to be learnt during the vital speech-formation years of one to six years of age ... Children who today are cut off from normal society because of their inability to speak will be able to attend normal schools and take their place in normal society as adults, experiencing relatively minor disadvantages. '

Professor Graeme Clark, who pioneered the bionic ear at the University of Melbourne, forwarded letters to Bill from people around New South Wales who had made enquiries about having their hearing restored. One letter was from a 58-year-old woman, Shirley Hanke, who had been completely deafened at the age of eleven from an allergic reaction to a school diphtheria immunisation. Bill had to concentrate as he listened to Shirley, whose voice was low and European-sounding despite her being a fifth-generation Australian. Shirley's hearing nerves had received no stimulation for forty-seven years and Bill wondered if they would be able to respond to the bursts of electrical activity produced by the electrodes in a cochlear implant.

The media were very interested in Bill's involvement with the fledgling cochlear implant program in New South Wales. Bob can remember rushing home from work one evening to watch Bill in a television interview explaining how the cochlear implant worked. He points out that 'Graeme Clark's implant was known in Melbourne, but it was something new and controversial in Sydney'. Bob had forged a successful career in real estate since arriving in Australia in 1972. Even though he worked in the city and Bill worked a few kilometres away at a hospital in Camperdown, people still mistook the brothers for each other. This included the time Bill was about to insert the needle through a patient's eardrum for a hearing test. The man had an anxious look on his face when he said, 'Oh, I know you. You used to work for Raine & Horne.' Bill replied, without the hint of a smile, 'Oh, I've given that away. It wasn't very interesting selling properties, so I've changed professions since then.'

Bob specialised in commercial real estate, so he couldn't provide much practical advice to his brother and sister-in-law about residential properties, but Jan drove Alex around for open inspections. Bill and Alex decided on an attractive clinker brick home, set well back from Clissold Avenue in the northern suburb of Wahroonga, with schools nearby for their children Laura and Hugh. Bill thinks that Hugh at twelve was the lucky one as he would be starting high school in the correct year, but he worried that

Laura would have a harder time fitting in at fourteen, which is 'not the best age to be put into a new girls' school'. The Gibson family spent their first Australian Christmas Day with Bob and Jan at a large family gathering with Jan's sister Annette, who lived in nearby Turrumurra.