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THE NIGHTS BELONG TO THE NOVELIST



Novelist

The Nights Belong To The Novelist, a finalist in this year's ATOM Awards, explores the witty and bizarre imagination of Australian novelist Elizabeth Jolley. Anne Simpson and Karen Jennings present a study guide for upper secondary students to Christina Wilcox's film and Elizabeth Jolley's writing.

This 48 minute documentary explores the paradoxical, witty and bizarre imagination of Australian novelist, Elizabeth Jolley. Producer and director Christina Wilcox uses readings, dramatized segments and interviews with Jolley to explore her craft and her imaginative world. It is a world peopled by eccentric characters, many of whom are older women, outsiders from mainstream society. It is sometimes poignant, but more often comic and exuberant.

Appropriately, this film about one of Australia's leading female authors, was made mostly by women. Christina Wilcox produced and directed; scripting and research were done by Wilcox and Joan Kirkby; cinematography by Erika Addis; sound by Bronwyn Murphy; editing by Denise Haslem and music by Felicity Foxx.

The principal cast is also female. Ruth Cracknell plays the woman in a lampshade and Miss Hailey, and Kerry Walker plays Miss Peabody and Miss Thorne, with Noel Bennett, Felicity Copeland, Evelyn Docker and Peter Giutronich playing supporting roles.

Wilcox was attracted to Elizabeth Jolley as a subject because of the visual vitality of her writing, and because of the contradictions of seriousness and silliness, sadness and humour in Jolley's work and in her per-

sonal demeanour. She explains: "The possibilities of developing and illustrating some of the richness of her work — through juxtaposing interviews with the seemingly 'prim' and 'innocent' Jolley with excerpts from her fiction — the possibilities of blending fiction with reality, were wonderfully present."

The resulting film is a compelling exploration of a writer's world. Elizabeth Jolley talks with precision and elegance and she has an endearing, self-deprecating humour. In print and on screen she is a wonderful storyteller. Wilcox's film captures these qualities in a fluidly-structured film which deftly blends interviews and re-enactments. *The Nights Belong to the Novelist* evokes the richness and humour of Jolley's work in a multi-layered documentary-drama format. The performances are excellent and the direction and cinematography powerfully situate the characters in setting and landscape. The film incorporates readings and enactments from *Woman in a Lampshade*, *Milk and Honey*, *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, *Mr Scobie's Riddle* and *Palomino*.

The Nights Belong to the Novelist has won numerous awards. It was a finalist in the Greater Union Awards at the Sydney Film Festival, an official selection in the Edinburgh Film Festival, won the Erwin Rado Prize for best Australian short film at the

Melbourne Film Festival, the 1987 AFI award for direction (non-feature), a silver plaque for creativity at the Chicago Film Festival, and most recently the Grand Prix at the Montreal International Festival of Films on Art, where it competed with 90 international entries.

Wilcox was trained in Media Studies and English Literature at Macquarie University in Sydney. She initially decided to do Media Studies because she wanted to improve her skills in making home movies. She then picked up some work on some documentaries about engineering and extended her skills through several Australian Film, TV and Radio School Open Program courses.

Her first two films deal with the Australian environment. The first, *A Voice for the Wilderness* (1983), is about rainforests, wilderness and environmental activism. *Sands of Time* (1985) deals with Fraser Island, the largest sand island in the world. In 1987 she directed *Breaking Through*, one of the *Women '88* series for Film Australia and the Bicentennial Authority, as well as producing and directing *The Nights Belong to the Novelist*. *Nights...* was funded through 10BA investment and made on a budget of \$152,000. She has recently completed *Carolyn and the Frog: An East Gippsland Story*, a half-hour docu-drama about the forests of East Gippsland.

Elizabeth Jolley was born in the industrial Midlands of England in 1923, to a Viennese mother, the daughter of an Austrian general, and a very principled, religious father. Elizabeth and her sister had a very unconventional upbringing. The family were Quakers and their early education was largely supervised at home by their father and a series of French and German governesses, who were frequently in conflict with the girls' mother.

"I seem to remember various Françaises and Grets being packed up and taken to the station with boiled up faces, you know, red with tears and my father being very humble and apologetic." (Headon)

Other complications were caused by a constant stream of refugees given accommodation by their father and their mother's longstanding relationship with another man, a liaison which was apparently tolerated by their father.

At age 11, Elizabeth gained a scholarship to a Quaker boarding school, which she initially hated, but later came to love. She emerged from it with very high ideals, no idea of money and a "lack of clothes sense" which she claims still to have. Another legacy has been her feeling that she is very much her "brother's keeper". "It took me a long time to throw off a sense that I was responsible for people. This is a good thing, but it can also be a bad thing. I would tend to see people's problems in such a way that I would react to them . . . I slowly learned not to worry so much." (Heaton)

She first trained as a nurse and it was in this capacity that she met her husband Leonard. Leonard was a librarian and it was a mutual and happy decision for him to accept a post as librarian in Western Australia. They emigrated in 1959.

Jolley has been writing since she was a child and has always kept a journal. It was not until the mid 1960s, however, that she started submitting manuscripts for publication. Her first efforts were rejected, and it was only after some success in England that her stories began to appear in Australian journals and on radio. Like many Australian artists, an international reputation paved the way for acceptance in Australia. Living in Western Australia probably further postponed national recognition. Indeed her first book *Five Acre Virgin* (short stories) did not appear until 1976. Since then her reputation has become firmly established, and she is now claimed as one of our foremost writers. Her publications include *The Travelling Entertainer* (1979), *Palomino* (1981), *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* (1981), *Woman in a Lampshade* (1983), *Mr Scobie's Riddle* (1983), *Milk and Honey* (1984), *Foxybaby* (1985), *The Well* (1986) and *The Sugar Mother* (1988).

Her novels have won many awards, including the NSW Premier's Literary Award in 1985 for *Milk and Honey* and the Miles Franklin Award for best Australian novel for *The Well* in 1987.

● Question

□ Without attempting to attribute autobiographical qualities to her narratives or characters, do you think you can see any ways in which Jolley's past, her personal interests or life style are represented in her work?

RECURRING THEMES IN JOLLEY'S NOVELS

Listing Jolley's works chronologically is somewhat misleading, as they were not in fact written in the order in which they were published. One of the distinctive aspects of her work is the way in which characters, themes, incidents, dialogue and images overlap, return, are re-worked and re-emerge in different stories. Rather than

resulting in boredom and repetition, this leads to an intriguing sense of *déjà vu*. Jolley keeps folders on her characters and is continually adding to them so that they are developed, re-cast and often re-appear from a different perspective in another story.

Most of her major characters are older women, with the exceptions of Mr Scobie and Edwin (*The Sugar Mother*), and all of them are what the author has been pleased to describe as 'survivors'. This character trait is likely to elicit a sympathetic response from younger readers, bridging the gap between the readers' youth and the characters' age. Miss Hailey, Miss Peabody, Mr Scobie, Miss Harper, Weekly and even Diana Hopewell are people striving for independence, recognition of their own individuality and their right to be themselves in the face of unyielding and exploitative institutions. They are all unconventional, even eccentric individuals and adolescent readers will respond to their efforts not be swallowed and defeated by the insidious power of conventional good sense.

Another rewarding thread in Elizabeth Jolley's work is her portrayal of the landscape and her characters' relationship with it. Particularly in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* and *The Well*, she has developed a theme of attachment and identification with the land. The author herself devotes much of her time to a farm where she raises geese and grows oranges, lemons, plums, quinces and apples, with varying degrees of success.

Music and dance also figure prominently in her real and fictitious world. Jolley comments on these in the film, and Wilcox devotes two relatively long sequences to passages from *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* and *Mr Scobie's Riddle* to explore these motifs.

Jolley defies convention and disconcerts some readers by dwelling on the sexuality of her elderly female characters. At odds with the personal image she herself projects, her bold women harbour strong desires and passions that frequently find surprising expression in words and erotic encounters. Much of the humour and the pathos of the stories lie in the irony of the gap between circumspect appearance and hidden fervour. Her humour has been described as black, biting and savage, particularly in *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, but it can also be liberating, exuberant and delightfully wicked, as it often is in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*.

● Questions

- Who are your favourite Jolley characters? Why do you like them? What concerns do you have for them?
- In the film, Elizabeth Jolley says that "everybody is in some kind of imprisonment, and they make their way through it or out of it as best they can. Some people are more aware of it than others." Comment on this claim in relation to some of the characters in her novels.
- "Whatever the 'lifts, lighteners, humour and exquisiteness' contained in *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, it remains fundamentally a very sad story, whereas *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* is a celebration." Discuss this interpretation.

MR SCOBIE'S RIDDLE AND MISS PEABODY'S INHERITANCE

These two novels best demonstrate Jolley's experimentation with narrative structure and point of view. For example, *Mr Scobie's Riddle* begins with a "guide to the perplexed" which appears to be a sort of synopsis or index of incidents in the novel in note form. Then we have a record of the notes passed between Night Sister M. Shady and Matron H. Price. These are interspersed in the formal narrative and maintain an hilarious dialogue between the pompous matron and the obtuse night nurse.

NOVEMBER 9 NIGHT SISTER'S REPORT
Very sorry about notices matron but bathroom door is the only one soft enough to take a drawing pin. Bath prepared for Mrs Tompkins also kitchen floor and saucepan.

ROOM 3 very quiet all night. Nothing abnormal to report.

Signed Night Sister M. Shady

Night Sister Shady: Of course Room 3 was very quiet all night. Mrs Morgan, Miss Hailey, Mrs Tompkins, Mrs Murphy and Mrs Renfrew were moved to the District Hospital to have their injuries treated. Don't you ever read my day report?

My brother I. Price (Lt Col. retired) will be sleeping in Room 3 for the present. Please give him hot milk 10 p.m. also Mrs Tompkins bath and kitchen floor. And Night Sister Shady, it has come to my notice that you are unregistered please note that your pay will be adjusted as from when you took up duties in this hospital. I shall be obliged, in future, to address you as Mrs Shady but for the purposes of the Good Name of this nursing home you will continue as Night Sister Shady brackett (unregistered) close brackett.

Signed Matron H. Price

Miss Peabody's Inheritance is even more complex as the reader must follow several stories — that of Miss Peabody in her tightly-constricted life as a secretary in England, and her correspondence with the author Diana Hopewell, an invalid confined to a wheelchair in a West Australian hospital. Diana not only sends the manuscript of her novel in which we become totally immersed with the fortunes of Arabella Thorne, Gwenda Mannors and Edgely, but also engages Miss Peabody and the reader in the process of her writing and the development of her characters. One's frame of reference and perspective is constantly changing, as the following passage demonstrates.

I shall have to be careful, the novelist adds in small writing, to squeeze as much as possible on to the bottom of the last page, about the clichés; in future I shall underline them with a red pen. Also I have to admit that I shall probably not manage to hit the peak in pornography as in the love in the saddles scenes in Angels etc.

The lack of quotation marks here and throughout the book (Consider the very first sentences of the novel: I have a Headmistress in mind, you know, a tremendously responsible sort of woman, the novelist's large handwriting was black on large sheets of paper) are typical of Jolley's flouting of conventional literary and narrative style by "misusing" punctuation deliberately to blur the identity of the narrator and to suggest a number of possible interpretations and layers of meaning. "... the identities of the speaker, and of the person to whom the speaker's words are addressed, are endlessly shifted, exchanged, conflated and shared ... to create ambiguities of meaning and identity ... At these sites of transition from one level of narration to the other, the uncertainty about who said or wrote what continually resists the readerly desire for clarity, for order, for closure; the reader is enticed through the text by the mysteries it sets up and the desire to have them solved." (Goldsworthy, pp. 478-9)

Clichés in turn of phrase, behaviour, perspective and interpretation often worry Jolley's characters, including even Matron Price. Jolley talks about the problem of cliché at the end of the film. Her own writing, however, is fresh, funny, wise and often disconcerting, challenging our assumptions and ways of thinking. Wilcox has managed to convey much of this feeling in her film in a style which is, itself, lively and challenging.

FICTION AND REALITY IN THE FILM

One of Jolley's recurrent themes is the imagination, and the "fine line between truth and fiction." (*Miss Peabody's Inheritance*). Wilcox's film sets out to construct an analogy of her work, blurring the line between truth and fiction, or making it as fine as possible. As she explains in the following interview, she is interested in questioning the nature of truth, and the documentary-drama format enables her to play with different 'truths', with different levels of reality. The film creates a natural and easy flow between the interviews and the drama, which can appear deceptively seamless and 'natural'. But its structure is in fact very complex. Consider the Shower scene, where five levels of reality operate together.

The scene opens with Jolley reading an excerpt from *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* to an audience. The passage she is reading involves three levels of reality:

1. Miss Peabody's reactions while reading a letter she has received from a novelist in Australia.
2. The story contained in the letter, involving a headmistress who is holidaying in the country in a motel with a friend.
3. The world of the novelist in Australia and her habits of underlining and commenting on the style of her writing.

And then, there are two further levels:

4. Underpinning the action in the novel, the film employs Jolley's voice-over comment on what she has been reading.
5. The fifth level, the reading, underscores all other levels.

● Questions

- Examine closely the sequence in which Miss Peabody collects her mail from the front door. What function is served by the multiple layering of images here? How does the music complement the visuals?

THE PRINTED WORD IN THE FILM

In her novels, Jolley explores the possibility of form on the printed page, sometimes through notices, signs and labels (stylistically reminiscent of Laurence Sterne). She uses as formats an exchange of letters, entries in log books, shopping lists and she includes misspellings in these to draw attention to the words themselves, and to the humorous possibilities of their misuse. (See *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* and *Mr Scobie's Riddle*).

Wilcox, a filmmaker who works with images, has made this film about Jolley, a writer, who works with words. Appropriately, Wilcox incorporates the printed word as a recurrent image in her film, as a symbol of the subject matter; that is, books and writing. This also provides another means of capturing something of the zany humour of Jolley's writing.

● Questions

- What filmic strategies and devices does the filmmaker use to explore the process of writing? Consider mise en scène, editing, point of view, voice-over narration, dialogue and intertitles.
- In her review of *The Nights Belong to the Novelist*, Anna-Maria Dell'Oso suggests that a documentary on a living writer can be a tricky exercise, because "despite their skill with words, writers are not necessarily any better at talking about the creative process or their talent than any one else". She goes on to say that there is a danger that the film could betray the imaginative world of the writing itself. However, she writes that there are no such feats or disappointments in *The Nights* ... Do you agree?
- Is Elizabeth Jolley successful in talking about her writing?
- Is Chris Wilcox successful in dramatizing the imaginative world of the writing itself?

STRUCTURE OF THE FILM

The Nights Belong to the Novelist has a complex structure which cuts between interviews, dramatic re-enactments, readings from the stories and observational footage of the author at home and at work. This structure at times becomes very intricate, especially where there are transitions between Elizabeth Jolley and characters such as Jasmine Tredwell, the woman in the lampshade, who is herself a writer.

● Questions

- What devices are used to signal the transitions from Elizabeth Jolley's 'real' world to the world of the characters? What visual or audio motifs establish the links?

- Observe the ways in which the audio component (narration, music, sound effects, dialogue) from one sequence sometimes overlaps the next visual image. (eg, Elizabeth Jolley's voice-over with dramatized sequences using actors.) Note how these strategies weave an intricate fabric in the film.

- Discuss the variety of narrative techniques Jolley uses in her fiction, and consider the implications of her style in translating to the screen.

Time

With few exceptions, films manipulate time on the screen. They sometimes slow it down, but normally they speed it up, compressing large blocks of 'real' time to short sequences of screen time. Objects in the mise en scène may also convey a strong sense of the past. Films and novels may also use flashbacks (and occasionally flashforwards) to manipulate the time order of events.

● Questions

- What filmic devices are used to juxtapose the past and the present in *The Nights* ...? How does it manipulate time? Does the filmmaker use devices such as titles, dissolves, ripples or fades to signal transitions in time or place, or from reality to fiction?
- What 'props' are used to convey a sense of Elizabeth Jolley's childhood?
- Think about how you might make a film about one of your favourite authors.
 - Which author would you choose and why?
 - What personal qualities of the author would be important for this choice?
 - Which stories or novels would you concentrate on?
 - Which actors would you use for some of the main characters? (We'll assume you've got a big budget, so choose freely!)
 - What locations would you use?
 - Choose one passage that you might dramatize for your film. Map out a storyboard for this sequence.
 - What music might be appropriate for this sequence?

PERFORMANCES

The dramatic re-enactments in the film give both the general reader and the student an awareness of the richness and humour of Jolley's novels. Ruth Cracknell and Kerry Walker, two of Australia's best known comic actresses, play the four main parts in the film. Ruth Cracknell plays the eccentric Miss Hailey and the even more bizarre woman in the lampshade, Jasmine Tredwell. Kerry Walker plays the timid, introverted Miss Peabody and the formidable but vulnerable headmistress, Arabella Thorne.

● Questions

- Observe closely the performances of Ruth Cracknell and Kerry Walker. Examine qualities of appearance, gesture, movement, clothing, delivery of lines, etc. to consider how these actresses represent their characters. Are they as you imagined them to be when reading the novels?

MUSIC

Jolley's writing is rich in musical references, and it is from these references that the classical music in the film is drawn. Wilcox's daughter, Felicity Foxx, researched the classical music for the film and also wrote and composed the song "Lovin' Me" which is used in the sequence where Debbie Frome dances for Miss Thorne.

Jolley's character Laura in *Palomino* listens to and talks about the Beethoven String Quartets. The setting for *Palomino* is an extension of the valley where Jolley has her farm. Thus, Beethoven's String Quartet no. 15 is used under the *Palomino* readings and the farm sequences.

The overture to *The Flying Dutchman* by Richard Wagner was integral to the scene from *Mr Scobie's Riddle* where Miss Hailey sings and conducts in the park.

Segments from Beethoven's *Spring Sonata*, also mentioned in *Palomino*, recur throughout the film. It occurs first under the radio announcer's voice prior to the reading of *Woman in a Lampshade*, then in the autobiographical piece under the dolls' houses and again at the end under Miss Hailey's pine tree dance.

It is picked up again for the end credits just after Jolley says: "I think that putting the magic in is perhaps one of the hardest things

to do (in writing) but if you can manage it . . . it's a bit like a nice phrase of music that comes in perhaps more than once so that it really gives a kind of satisfaction and a little touch of optimism."

• Questions

□ Examine closely the sequence where Miss Hailey sings and then later conducts *The Flying Dutchman*. Observe the integration of fantasy and reality in this fictional sequence. How is the transition from Miss Hailey's song to the full orchestration achieved? What does this transition tell us about Miss Hailey's state of mind?

□ Examine the sequence where Debbie dances with her friends and then alone for the headmistress. What feelings does the music evoke here?

□ Elizabeth Jolley claims that she uses music to heighten and lift the pain of her characters and their predicaments. Do you think she does this successfully in the novels you have read?

□ Try her suggestion of matching music with a character you have created in your own writing or filmmaking. Does music help you to explore your characters?

The authors thank Christina Wilcox for her co-operation in preparing this study guide

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Christina Wilcox/Yowie Films, Press Kit to *The Nights Belong to the Novelist*.



The Nights Belong to the Novelist

AWARD WINNING FILM
ON AUSTRALIAN WRITER
ELIZABETH JOLLEY

Produced and Directed by
Christina Wilcox

with actors

Ruth Cracknell and Kerry Walker

- Grand Prix, Montreal 1988
- Silver Award, Chicago 1988
- Best Short film, Melbourne 1987
- Best Director, A.F.I. Awards 1987

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... Karen Jennings continues her inquiry into *The Nights Belong To The Novelist*. Here she talks to director Christina Wilcox.

What drew you to Elizabeth Jolley as a subject?

It was her writing, and especially the novel *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* which I read in one sitting. I was captured from the first page. I laughed on that first page and thought the writing was very visual and I knew it would be filmically successful. After that I met her and I thought that she would be filmically very successful. She is a very appealing personality. When people see the film they want to see more of her.

Your previous films have been films about the environment — one about rainforests and one about Fraser Island, and I wondered whether part of your affinity with Elizabeth Jolley was the role of the landscape in her novels. Obviously the landscape is very important in your film. Was that a factor?

It wasn't really. I was interested in literature as well as the environment. At the time I made the environment films there were a couple of issues that just burned to have films made about them. It was just that I'm interested in Australian writing and it was something that was in the front of my mind at the time I was ready to make another film.

In some ways one would have thought it was difficult to make a film, a visual document, about a written medium. And

yet I think you manage very successfully to get inside the writer's mind, to film the process of writing. Was this a real challenge for you?

No, I just thought it was very easy — not necessarily the whole of the filming process. The material was so rich and it seemed to offer so many possibilities. I think one of the qualities of Elizabeth Jolley's writing is that it's very visual and it suggests pictures.

What about scenes when you're actually filming her writing and crossing out things and changing things? They work very well.

Yes, I had thought that part of the subject matter was the symbol of the written word or the printed word. In my other films I had never used subtitles or captions to say who people were or where they came from. I thought that the things you should be using your eyes for are the pictures. But in this film I wanted to put written words actually into the film in a variety of ways. I found the image of her handwriting fascinating — particularly the way she makes notes about little ideas that pop into her head. In her manuscript she has a page with little boxes with writing in other coloured inks, and pieces of paper stapled on to other pieces of paper, and lines and arrows and insertions and funny quirky, little phrases. And in the published novel this happens too. She has misspellings as part of the story and notices and letters and shopping lists. I wanted in some more formal areas to have the printed word looking like the word on the page, so we have supertitles over pictures, intertitles and subtitles, and we have labels and school notices from one of her books, as well as her handwriting and parts of the manuscript.

You've said somewhere that you're especially interested in the fine line between truth and fiction and that the documentary form constructs a neat "truth" from several less tidy "truths". Could you elaborate on that?

I suppose not every documentary film does do that, not because it doesn't succeed with what it's doing — for instance, you get cinema verité where the camera just rolls and it's not edited and you do get a "truth" as it appears. But I think everybody's mind brings with it a particular experience, and they're going to absorb that truth in the light of their own experience. So there are no two truths that match. I think that questioning of what is truth is a very interesting thing to do. If you refine the material down a little bit more and edit a "pure" documentary film, then you're going to have a personal perspective and values more heavily underlined by editing. So you get a different "truth".

You're stressing that all documentaries are in fact constructions, that they're not the whole truth?

I don't think they can be. I'm sure people go into making documentaries with a tremendous integrity. Otherwise they wouldn't do it. But I do think that they can't help but present their version of what they think is the reality of the world that their documentary film encompasses.

The film has a remarkably fluid structure. You seem to move almost effortlessly from interviews to readings, to re-enactments of passages, to documentary footage of Elizabeth Jolley teaching and pottering about on her farm. How did you arrive at that structure? Was it difficult to get that fluidity?

It was difficult, but it was planned. I suppose I'd seen a lot of films. Transitions interested me — whether from documentary interview to drama, or within drama from imagination to the reality of the story itself, or flashbacks or flash-forwards, dreams, or a confusion of wishing that you were in some other situation. There are all sorts of possibilities and I think film does it well. It was a chance to play with that.

Film doesn't always do it well. But I think you've managed it very well — it was one of your real achievements.

It was probably more magical in this film because the drama isn't trying to be biographical. This is an exploration of Elizabeth Jolley's imagination and it's easier I think. One thing that readers are able to do with books is to allow their own experience to play on an interpretation. I took on that liberty as a filmmaker — to allow my imagination to interact with the work and to come up with the pieces of drama I came up with. The challenge really was making the most of the fiction/reality confusion — this is a major theme in her work and I wanted the film to be an analogy for this aspect of her work. Documentary drama is a perfect format.

One of the very powerful and very evocative sequences in the film is Miss Peabody collecting the letters from the novelist though the door. It's an excellent visual representation of her psychological state, where she's moving further and further into unreality, and as she does, the film's imagery moves further and further into a kind of surrealism, with superimpositions and so on. It must have been very hard to get the right touch there, especially as you were only filming short excerpts. You weren't filming the whole story, so you had to be very economical, didn't you?

Earlier, I said everything was scripted quite tightly. It certainly does introduce Miss Peabody and her state of mind and introduces what the structure of *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* is like, and also what the story is all about. But I have to give credit to my cinematographer, Erika Addis, for that particular sequence of superimpositions. That was an idea that occurred to her when she read the script

and she wanted to try those multiple exposures. We did it in a little Bolex camera and rewind, but not quite back as far as we'd started. We did the letters falling in and had Kerry Walker as Peabody walking up to the door and back again about six times.

It works very well. The film plays around a lot with multiple levels of reality. Was that an important concern of yours?

Yes it was. It was again that question of what is real, and when you can have something real representing the imaginary. In a lot of cultures dreaming is the reality — the important part of their life. And their functioning, getting their daily bread and whatever, is only to support the time when they can dream their dreams. So I think that those different levels of reality are really good to explore. Peabody's life was dull and the way she imagined the world she was reading about in the letters was more enjoyable and real to her. In the book at that point there are really four levels of reality. There's Elizabeth Jolley, the writer, who's writing about a novelist who's making a comment on her own style of letter as she writes to Miss Peabody. There's Miss Peabody's existence, and then there's what she's reading about in the novelist's letters — this rather erotic and wild inverted schoolgirls's story where the schoolmistresses have all the fun and the midnight feasts, and the schoolgirls take the other role. On translation to film the number of levels increases again. There's one point in the film where five levels operate at the one time. I don't want it to sound too complicated — they're just there and people, like me, who like to analyse these things can.

I thought Erika Addis's photography was very impressive throughout the film. It has a very rich texture to it and people are positioned in landscapes very effectively.

Yes. I'd always wanted to work with Erika, and I learnt a lot from her. Her work has a lively textural depth, a lively sense of colour and beautifully fluid camera movements.

You were very successful with the casting I thought. You had two excellent comic actresses in Ruth Cracknell and Kerry Walker.

Yes, they were both great to work with. Ruth Cracknell was an obvious for that sort of Jolley character. I decided on Ruth when I filmed the Premier's Literary Awards in 1985. Ruth was there and I had thought she was like the characters that I wanted to put into the film. Kerry was an actress whose work I had admired for years as well. They both play two parts each and that was an idea — using the same actress for two different parts — that really interested me. Often in Elizabeth Jolley's work — reading different stories — there are characters very similar but with different names who seem to evolve one from the other — or the prototype is

there and there are embellishments which create the difference. So using the same actresses, Ruth and Kerry, is like another analogy to the writing.

One of the things that intrigued me was that Elizabeth Jolley comes across as a very shy, modest, private, almost prim kind of person. How did you manage to get her to be so relaxed in front of the camera?

Well, just probably by hours of talking. She wasn't always relaxed. There were times when she was quite tired and tense, and that showed in parts of the rushes. But when you take five hours of interviews and you're only going to put half an hour onto a film, you can pick the best bits out.

One of the film's achievements is that you capture the contradiction between Elizabeth Jolley's reserve and propriety, and the bawdy outrageous characters of her novels. You don't demolish that contradiction. You don't attempt to reconcile it. It's just presented, isn't it?

Yes. It's just there. The worst thing would be to try and explain it. I thought at the beginning that one would. It seemed to be the "documentary thing" to do. But I don't think people really need to have everything spelled out.

You've proved that Elizabeth Jolley's writing has an extraordinary visual quality. Have you got any plans to make films of her stories?

Yes. I have negotiated for options for some of the short stories and one of the novels and I'm working on treatments for these now. One is *Woman in a Lampshade*. It has tremendous suspense and ambiguity in it. Anything could happen in that situation — there's the possibility of violence, of exploitation, of some sort of seduction — possibly her of the young boy or maybe the other way around.

How is Nights . . . being exhibited and who do you see as its audience?

It has had successful seasons in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Canberra, Hobart and Perth. And it's now touring nationally in the travelling film festival. It has been sold to libraries in tape form, and the ABC and BBC have bought and screened it. There have also been sales in several other European countries.

What next for you? I gather that Nights . . . perhaps may be a pilot for a longer series on Australian writers. Is that so?

I'd like to do more. I think that there are a lot of both wonderful Australian writers and writing. I think that's the essential double. You've got to have the work that is really worth exploring, and then the personality of the writer. And I think there are a lot of people like that who should have their story told, and who would be wonderful material for filmmakers. The only thing is there is not a lot of money around for documentary films at the moment and not a big market for them on Australian television. And writers are perceived as having a very limited audience. Therefore the pre-sale price for a film on a writer is prohibitively low. So I'm waiting to see what better, economically more viable deal can be done. In the meantime I am writing the scripts for two short stories to be made either into half-hour or one-hour dramas. One is *Woman in a Lampshade*, the other is *The Performance*.

I gather you've already won numerous awards, including best director (non-feature) in the AFI awards.

Well I think that the film has won the awards really. Best director was the last nomination I was expecting. I did hope to get best documentary, or best editing because it's a superbly edited film. It looks deceptively simple because it's so seamlessly done but it's really very complex. Denise Haslem did a wonderful job picking out and interweaving bits from five different interviews. So I'm sorry that the rest of the crew who contributed tremendously to the project didn't get quite the same sort of acknowledgement in those awards.

