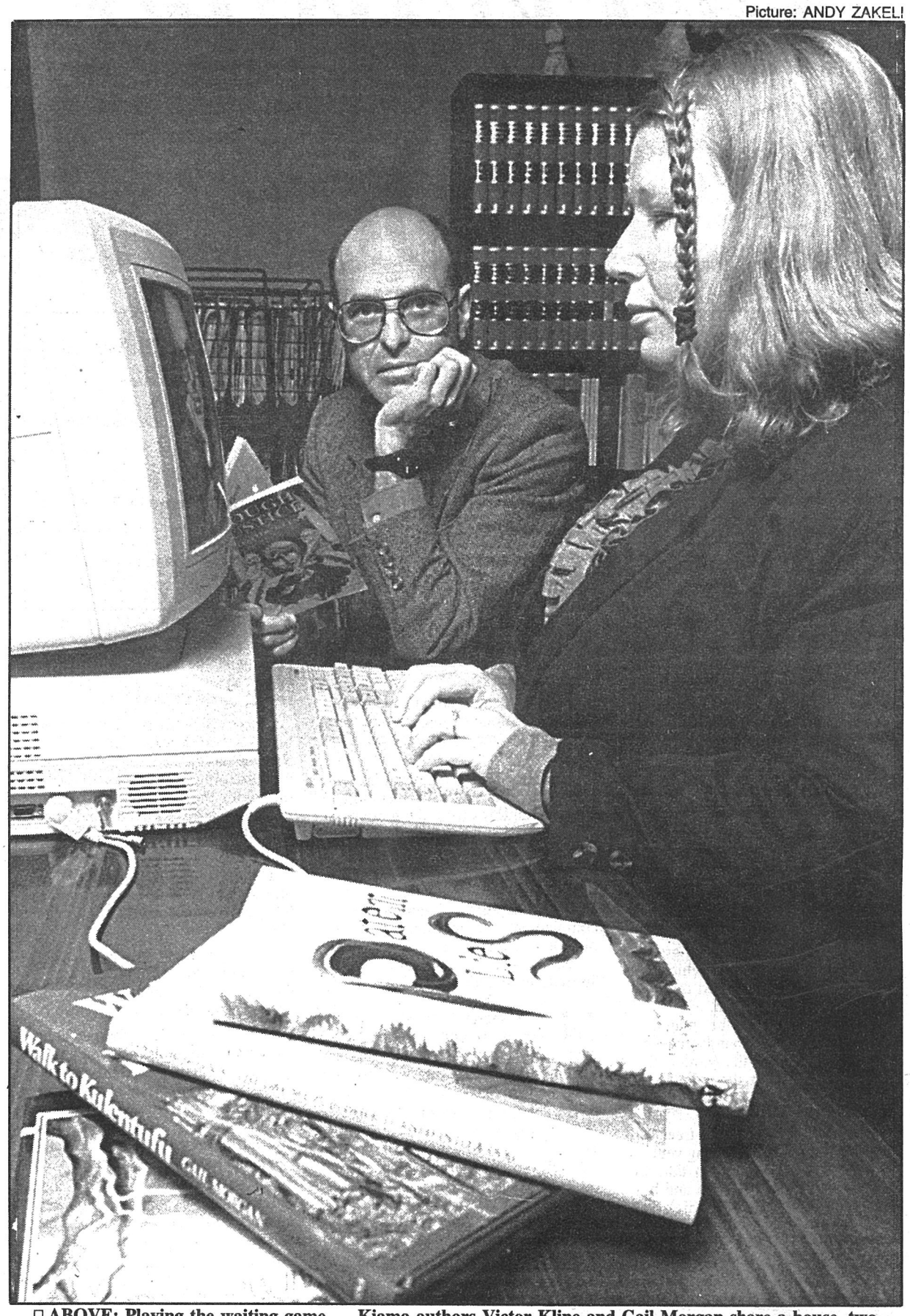
THE WRITE STUFF

□ Gail Morgan and Victor Kline manage to write novels while sharing a house in Kiama, the care of two energetic nine-year-olds, a dog called Doug, and *one* computer. They seem to be able to do it with a complete lack of professional jealousy, an obvious respect for each other's work, and a great deal of humour, as **JENNY DENNIS** discovers.

Picture: ANDY ZAKELI



□ **ABOVE: Playing the waiting game . . . Kiama authors Victor Kline and Gail Morgan share a house, two children, a dog, one computer and a complete lack of professional jealousy.**

WHEN Gail Morgan first began writing books, her husband Victor Kline was safely ensconced in the law.

It was 1978 and the Australian couple was in London, living in a boarding house and desperately trying to stay warm.

Gail began writing Promise Of Rain, her first published novel, in bed in the boarding house.

"It was the only way to stay warm," she said.

The story centred on Lucy, an Australian woman educated at a Sydney convent, who travels to Alice Springs and meets and falls in love with Titus, a painter and Aboriginal healer. Gail wrote the story on airline paper, in longhand.

These days, with four novels to her credit and a fifth under way, Gail has the luxury of working on a computer overlooking the leafy garden of the Kiama home she and Victor share with their nine-year-old twin daughters.

The couple moved to Kiama after living in a tiny Balmain terrace. They moved in search of a better lifestyle for their children, for the sense of community, and because Gail wanted to live by the sea.

"I have a passion for the sea," she said, "and I think my latest novel, Patent Lies, shows that."

She said at the time they decided to move they were both working from home and they could have chosen to live anywhere.

"Kiama seemed less over-populated than some of the areas to the north," Gail said. And it wasn't too far away from "the centre of things" (Sydney).

Now, after living in Kiama for 16 months, Gail no longer considers Sydney the centre of anything. She has discovered there are unexpected benefits to living in a small community.

"When you live in a city everyone you deal with has a sort of specialist function. There's one person who sells you fruit, another you see at the bus stop, and there's somebody else who's your boss.

"People risk becoming uni-dimensional because cities are so huge, there are so many people and so many functions."

Moving to a small community has made her notice the difference.

"Here the person who sells you fruit also trains your kids at soccer or walks his dog past your house late at night.

"People take on a much greater complexity. They become multi-dimensional and much more integrated."

After little more than a year in the close-knit Kiama community, neither she nor Victor would contemplate moving back to the city.

VICTOR no longer works as a lawyer and, since moving to Kiama, he's had his first novel, a mystery, published. Rough Justice hit the bookshops earlier this month. It's undeniably legal in its subject matter, but decidedly "non legal" in its approach.

Victor said he'd written novels — unpublished ones — before. "And I've had a lot of short stories published."

Rough Justice, in fact, was a commissioned novel — a most unusual situation for a first novel. The commission resulted from a short story Victor wrote and entered in a mystery story contest.

Victor's approach to writing a mystery story was decidedly different. First, he dispensed with the idea of a gratuitous death, instead writing a mystery in which no-one actually dies. He also decided to make his short story an amusing mystery — another flight of fancy.

He didn't win, but his story was short-listed and happened to catch the eye of Patrick Gallagher, the managing director of the Australian publishing house Allen and Unwin.

"He actually went looking for me, which is most unusual for a publisher," Victor said.

When Gallagher caught up with Victor he suggested he write a novel using the short story's lawyer character Felicio Tagg.

Rough Justice, a story about "Australia's most incompetent barrister", is the result. It's already had a complimentary review in The Catholic Weekly, which Victor admits to finding "a bit of a worry". The reviewer remarked on the fact that it contained "not one obscenity".

Allen and Unwin would now like Victor to dust off Felicio Tagg for a second novel, but he doesn't know that he can be bothered.

"I'm bored with the character and, anyway, I don't know that I want to write another novel."

According to Australian publishing folklore, second novels are a no-no. The theory is that everyone has one novel in them — but only one.

"The truth is that most people don't have a novel in them at all," Victor said.

Interestingly, as well as second novels, publishers also tend to steer clear of books with green covers, upbeat endings and anything set in Papua New Guinea.

(Despite the superstition, Gail's second novel Walk To Kulentufu, which was set in Papua New Guinea, nevertheless sold well. Perhaps it was the lack of a green cover that saved it?)

AFTER practicing as a lawyer for five years, Victor decided it wasn't for him.

"I never really enjoyed the law," he said. "I was the wrong temperament." He didn't like the conflict involved, and he wasn't prepared to pretend he did.

His years as a lawyer were spent, in the main, doing criminal work and he quickly became disillusioned with the system.

"I saw a lot of people sentenced to prison and I really couldn't bear it." He came to the conclusion that all the innocent people were convicted and the guilty went free.

"I know it's a simplification, but that's how it seemed to me."

With most criminal cases hinging on who the jury ultimately believed, Victor felt the hardened professional criminals, who were good at giving evidence because they'd had a lot of practice, were inevitably the ones that were believed.

He still keeps his legal hand in these days by editing the Federal Court's judgments — a full-time job in itself.

Victor has always read everything Gail writes. And she, in turn, read Rough Justice as he wrote it. The help that each, with their different approach to writing and story-telling, provides the other is invaluable.

Victor said it's "death to all fiction" to be trained in the law. Lawyers are taught the importance of covering all the bases. The tendency, in the law, was to leave nothing to the imagination.

Lawyers tended to write "horrible, convoluted sentences" that were deadly in a novel, he explained.

"The law is a pompous subject and lends itself to pompous writing."

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Authors have the 'write stuff'

□ FROM PAGE 25

GAIL approaches her writing creatively, happy to let the readers think for themselves, while the lawyer in Victor leaves him wanting to give his readers every bit of possible information, no matter how boring, so they don't need to think for themselves at all.

Gail has helped by toning down Victor's urge to overwrite and his desperate need to leave absolutely nothing to the reader's imagination. She'll quickly see what's superfluous and tell him to get rid of it.

On the other hand, Victor helps Gail by reading everything she writes and suggesting bits that he feels can safely be left out of her work.

"In every book I get an area in which I become obsessed," Gail said. In Walk To Tulenkufu, it was trout. "You're not writing the whaling sequence in Moby Dick here," he told her. Reluctantly, she agreed to cut about 40 pages of detail explaining the differences between rainbow and brown trout.

Even now, with four published novels to her credit, Gail values her husband's opinion of her work above anyone else's. She said she remembered how hard it was in the beginning.

"When I began writing Promise Of Rain I didn't think I would ever finish it because I didn't feel confident I would be able to write at all.

"I think any writer looks back on a first novel and just hopes they're not too embarrassed by it," Gail said.

The communication gap proved the major problem in having a novel with an Australian theme published by an English publisher. The publisher, Virago, sent Gail 40 pages of suggestions. They wanted her to "explain" brolgas, for example.

It was an experience which, when added to a multitude more, led her to write a third novel that's been described as a "scathing and realistic satire" on the publishing industry.

The Day My Publisher Turned Into A Dog was the result and it — unlike her other novels — was published 1989 by a family publishing company, Frances Allen, she and Victor set up.

il said she wrote the book because she began to feel like the "Colonial pet poodle".

"I felt I was the token woman in feminist press. A case of: Token Woman — Subclass: Colonial.

"We knew if we didn't publish that one ourselves, it probably wouldn't be published." She said she wrote it to regain some of her pride, and to show other writers they could stand up to the multinationals.

"But I don't ever want to have to publish my own books again," Gail said. "The pressure was too much. I had to write them, publish them and even parcel them up."

GAIL Morgan is not the sort of novelist who can be pigeonholed. Each of her books is different to the ones that went before. Both the subjects, and the way she deals with them, are diverse.

Her books have been described as "ambitious and wide ranging . . . satirical and comic in the manner of Patrick White" (Mary Rose Livarani, The Weekend Australian); and "crammed with ideas and events" (Elisabeth Anderson, The Sunday Times).

"Here is a writer of wit and concission," wrote John McGregor in The Australian; "Morgan's prose is truly funny . . . good comic writers are few and far between in Australian literature" (Maria Trefely-Deutch in the Sunday Telegraph).

These days Gail is confident about her writing and her ability to break the rules. She knows she'll be published — despite Dog — and she writes for the pure pleasure of it. "You wouldn't do it for the money," she said.

Her latest novel Patent Lies, which hits the bookstores this week, was the first she's had the luxury of writing full-time. Gail likes to write every day, spending between three and six hours at the computer. In fact she feels guilty if she doesn't.

Gail and Victor share a computer, but Gail has first option, according to Victor.

"When I want to write I have to stand in line," he said. Not that he has much choice. He needs Gail to help him work the computer.

□ A review of Gail Morgan's Patent Lies, and Victor Kline's Rough Justice appear in today's Weekend Magazine book section, on Page 36.

In search of truth and justice

PATENT LIES
By GAIL MORGAN
Allen & Unwin, $19.95

ROUGH JUSTICE
By VICTOR KLINE
Allen & Unwin, $12.95

□ By
STEPHEN FITZPATRICK

IF YOU only read one book this summer, make sure it is these two.

Gail Morgan's Patent Lies and Victor Kline's Rough Justice are, each in their own way, valuable reappraisals of the Australian way of life and the notion that there could even be such a thing.

Each critiques the European spirit of Enlightenment which tore down one society in this country and replaced it with another.

Morgan's fourth novel belongs to a growing body of Australian literature which experiments with narrative form at the same time as it tests the water of national identity.

The plot unfolds in a decidedly non-linear fashion, suggesting the difficulty of pinpointing exactly what it is to be Australian.

Patent Lies traces two separate narratives. One is the journey of those aboard the Endeavour on its first Pacific voyage of discovery — an attempt to ascertain the distance between the sun and the earth by means of charting the transit of Venus, and then to map the Great South Land.

The other strand involves the irascible Nobel Prize-winning author Grace Heatherton, a splitting headache for five thunderingly opposed former acquaintances of hers. Grace has died "of grief" at the ripe old age of 93, leaving each of her acquaintances slightly different version of what appears to be her final masterpiece.

Grace's manuscript is a re-written version of James Cook's Pacific journey, tracing Cook's dissatisfaction with the behaviour and attitudes of the naturalist Joseph Banks and attempting to resolve his own lowly station in life. Though made Lieutenant, the Yorkshire labourer's son recognises all too clearly the social gulf between himself and the arrogant aristocrat Banks.

Morgan plays on this distinction with aplomb, making Cook the more emotionally articulate of the two, and Banks the cretin who fatigues Cook with his "unceasing lack of regard for anything but himself".

The constant duel between these two voyagers — Banks seeking personal glory and Cook seeking some sort of enlightenment — is mirrored by the battle between the five recipients of Grace's manuscript.

Each is missing the final page of their bequest, and by close examination of the manuscript must find where the page is hidden.

As the seemingly inevitable sexual tensions develop between the group of three men and two women — soap opera sex symbol, literary editor, historian, Sicilian bricklayer and bricklayer's daughter — and as Sam, the bricklayer's daughter, comes closest to unravelling the mystery, their search for a million-dollar best-seller exposes the jealousies and insecurities bubbling away between the group.

KLINE, unlike Morgan, pays scant attention to narrative experiments. His Rough Justice is a 1960s Rumpole-like romp through the Australian legal system, with all its quirks and injustices and the inbuilt elitism that generally seems to favour the landed classes.

The power of the squattocracy — although these days probably as intrenched in the communications industry and urban real estate as it is in the countryside — is ridiculed through the feeble efforts of failed barrister Felico Tagg.

Tagg, of solidly working-class origins, divorced, amusingly similar to his dog, Douglas McDougal, and an absolute joke in a court of law, manages to have rural icon Kingsley Chatham put behind bars for three months for a crime he didn't commit — and that's while Tagg is representing Chatham!

Tagg eventually falls in with Chatham's divorced wife Gretel McGrath and her precious pooch Banjo, and together they recover a prime piece of Chatham's livestock.

Love triumphs and the social order remains unchanged, although in the process Kline has managed to make some scathing assessments of that social order.

Certainly Kline attempts less than Morgan, but a summer afternoon on the verandah with a long, cool drink could be far worse spent embroiled in the miasma of Felicio Tagg's own making.

What's new for young readers