

LE CHIEN ANDALOU

Novelist Gail Morgan has reversed the 'traditional' publishing path for writers. After two successful books, she has decided to publish her third, the surreal *The Day my Publisher Turned into a Dog*, by herself.

by Jamie Grant

A projectile made of whiskers and wire-brush fur had been launched at my knees. It had a damp tongue and a bark like a car alarm. What was going on? I had arranged to meet the novelist Gail Morgan at her cottage in the Sydney suburb of Balmain, to discuss her new book *The Day my Publisher Turned into a Dog*. Could it be that this enthusiastic terrier was in fact Morgan's publisher? No publisher of my acquaintance has been known to betray such emotion.

It transpired that Doug the dog is not the publisher in question, though he is an accomplished soccer player. Still, nothing would surprise me after a visit to the remarkable Morgan household.

Most successful writers follow a career path that is as predictable as the plot of a soap opera. It begins with the first book, the product of years of ambition and struggle, finally accepted by a little-known local publisher; after this a larger national publisher takes on the second book; and triumph comes when the third book is published overseas, leading to international fame.

Morgan has reversed this path. Starting out with almost no ambition to be a writer, she nevertheless produced a novel which was accepted by the major British publisher Virago: this was *Promise of Rain*, which appeared in 1985. Her second novel, *Walk to Kulentufu*, was published in Australia by Dent last year. Her third book takes her back to where most writers begin their career: she is publishing it herself.

As a rule, authors who publish their own books are engaged in what is known as 'vanity publishing'. For Morgan it is a business venture. *The Day my Publisher Turned into a Dog* is only the first title to appear under the imprint of Frances Allen, a firm made up of Morgan and her husband Victor Kline. There will be many more.

What better way to launch a new publishing company than with a novel by a well-established and proven author? If one is such an author, why not collect all of the profits from the book, instead of the mere 10 per cent others publishers offer? That is the reasoning behind this venture.

Its chances of success are good, as both of the company's principals have extensive experience of the publishing world. Morgan worked as

an editor for Reader's Digest Publications, as well as being an author, but she has had many other occupations as well.

These included working as a sandwich hand, an Aeroplane Jelly packer, a cappuccino machine operator, a dishwasher, as well as such lofty callings as a public service clerk and a teacher. Apart from a variety of money-making enterprises, of which writing and publishing books is only one, her primary employment at present is as a teacher of English as a second language. Her students have made her a "passionate believer in multiculturalism".

In pursuit of her miscellaneous career, Morgan has travelled widely; this must have contributed also to her belief in multiculturalism. Her first novel, a fictionalised family memoir, was written in London, where a snow-bound winter provoked a bout of nostalgia. She had moved to England after three years of teaching in Alice Springs.

Her next move was to France, where she lived in the coal mining town of St Etienne for a year. For a shorter period, she lived in Papua New Guinea, which provides a setting for part of *Walk to Kulentufu*. Since then she has lived in various parts of Sydney, the city she was born in, ending up in a house with water views.

Walk to Kulentufu, a moving and passionate story of obsession and conflict, bears no resemblance to Morgan's first novel *Promise of Rain*. *The Day my Publisher Turned into a Dog*, as the title suggests, is a surreal, and hilarious, fable, which in turn shares no similarity with either of the earlier novels.

This is somewhat of a curiosity. Most novelists – those ones who follow the soap opera career path – develop obsessions which recur throughout their work, becoming as recognisable as a signature. Curiously, Morgan does not even have a particular handwriting style. That is to say that she literally does not have a signature. She is able to write well in almost any hand – italic, roman or grocer's – as the mood strikes her. This unusual talent becomes a handicap when Morgan has to cash a cheque. Still, as handwriting analysts would tell us, it reflects a mind of exceptional versatility.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER ADAMS

and look like monsters"

And who, amid the haze of image and identity, is the real Cindy Sherman? "The childlike, goofier ones", she reveals, "are most like me." ■

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In addition to her three novels, Morgan has written narrative poems (which no-one has seen) and plays (which she has not attempted to produce). She seems to like a cauldron of creativity.

Such a description might evoke a picture of a bubbling, speedy enthusiast but this would be misleading. Despite her versatility, and her evident creative energy, Morgan is a comely, redheaded woman with a manner of great deliberation. Her answers to questions, always amusing, are also quite carefully expressed.

I asked why she had decided, in her new novel, to turn Delphine, her plot's antagonist, into a dog. "If I had written the novel in the '50s, I would have turned her into a rat," she said. "But the '80s are not about the rat race. They are all about being an obedient corporate dog lacking in initiative."

The dog she chose was a blue heeler. "I wanted an Aussie dog, Delphine had a bad case of the cultural cringe, and it seemed appropriate to turn her into a 'people's dog', a breed you might find in a caravan park, or as a guard dog bailing up a Jehovah's Witness at Warwick Farm. Besides, blue heelers are rather thuggish and sexy, which suits Delphine's personality."

Surrealism is much more difficult to bring off than might at first be apparent; the reader is asked to suspend disbelief, and in those cases where the suspension wanes, it is usually because the author has overstepped the bounds of common sense. On the other hand, as Morgan pointed out, "Special effects are cheaper to use in the novel than in movies. Transformation has always fascinated me, from Apuleius' 'Golden Ass' to Steven Spielberg's 'Roger Rabbit'. It is so eternal, so fundamental to the human spirit. It denies the brutish predictability of death. Any sense of the miraculous helps the spirit gain

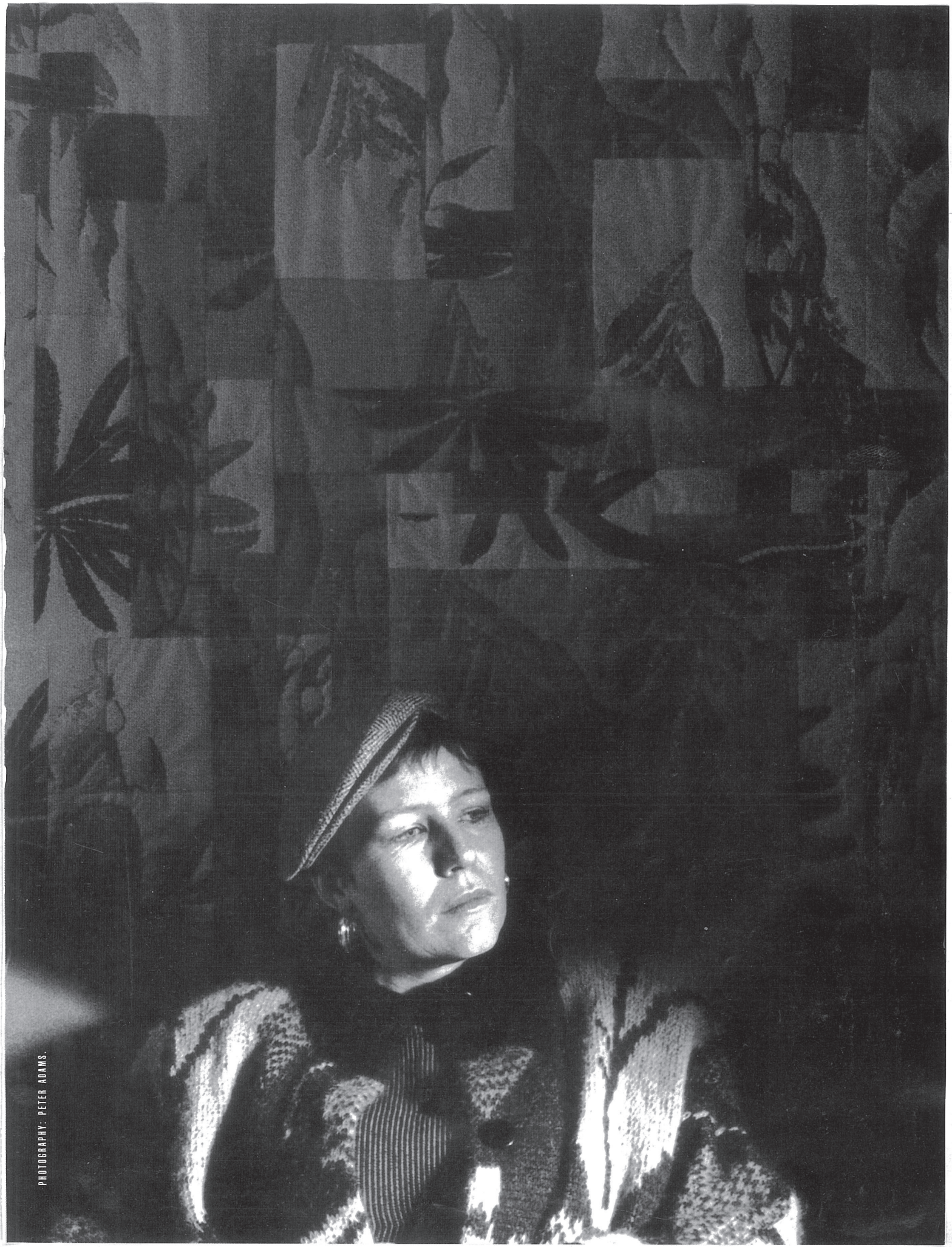
freedom from the body. Ever since I saw the film of the *Arabian Nights* I have dreamt of grand viziers and magic carpets."

The transformation visited on the fictional Delphine by Morgan would be enough to make a real-life publisher's hair stand on end. That is another reason for publishing it herself. Among other things, the book makes a vigorous attack on certain attitudes and practices which exist among Australian publishers.

The attack is made in a tone of mischievous good humour, but there are not many publishers who are known for their ability to see a joke. However, the book is a resolute defence of the position of the author: "An author can no longer afford the luxury of patronage, if they ever could. The Australian writer, because of a small domestic market and large numbers of overseas books, must become swash-buckling – an entrepreneur – if he/she wants to compete. The question is what kind of an entrepreneur – successful or otherwise."

The question of 'literary quality' – much fussed over by academics and other writers – is of little interest to Morgan.

When I left, Doug the dog escorted me to the door. I took another look at him, there *was* something about his teeth which reminded me of a publisher I had known . . . ■



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