

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Anne Deveson**

1930-

Writer, Broadcaster & Filmmaker

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 10 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Anne Deveson**

**Director/Producer** Rod Freedman

**Executive Producer** Mark Hamlyn

**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 2005

Study guide prepared by Roger Stitson © Film Australia

Also in Series 10: Tom Bass, Noeline Brown, Sir Zelman Cowen,  
Joan Kirner, Max Lake, Noel Tovey

## A FILM AUSTRALIA NATIONAL INTEREST PROGRAM

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## SYNOPSIS

Writer, broadcaster and filmmaker Anne Deveson has been on the leading edge of social change throughout her varied career. Through her ground-breaking television and radio documentaries, books and articles, and her membership of numerous boards and organisations, she has illuminated social issues and influenced policy in areas from poverty and aging to child abuse and disability.

She is perhaps best known for her work on mental illness – an area she became deeply involved in after her son developed schizophrenia, and which she told of in the book **Tell Me I'm Here** and the film **Spinning Out**.

Born in Malaya in 1930, Anne's own childhood was a model of comfortable colonialism until World War Two forced her and her mother to move to Western Australia as refugees.

In this interview, she recounts many of the personal challenges she has faced, including the difficulties she encountered in 1950s Australia – living with a married man and attempting to establish herself as a serious news journalist. And more recently, while writing her book **Resilience**, the sudden death of her partner, with whom she'd hoped to spend the rest of her life.

A natural communicator, Anne conveys the warmth and compassion that has made her a continuing source of inspiration and hope for many.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Journalism, Media Studies, Personal Development, History and Studies of Society and Environment.

## AFTER WATCHING

What do you recall from viewing the program?

1. When and where was Anne Deveson born?
2. What was the profession of Anne's father?
3. Why did the Deveson family move to Western Australia?
4. Describe the Deveson's lifestyle in Western Australia.
5. What mistake did Anne realise she'd made when she went to university in England?
6. What was Anne's first job when she left university?
7. Why did Anne return to Australia?
8. When Anne became pregnant, what important and personal decision did she make, and why?
9. When Anne applied to the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) in Sydney for a broadcasting job, which department was she sent to, and why?
10. Which radio station did Anne first work for in Sydney? Why did she later lose her job?
11. What was the famous television commercial Anne made, and what 'tag' was given to her for ever afterwards?
12. Name the important governmental commission to which Anne was appointed, and describe the work the Commission was to carry out.

13. In the late 1970s two personal tragedies affected Anne's life. What were they?

14. As a result of one of these tragedies Anne later wrote a book and produced a film. Name the book and the film.

15. What was the topic Anne was researching while visiting her brother in Italy?

16. What was the name of the man Anne met in 1999 and what was his profession?

17. Why did she initially want to meet this man?

18. What disease had he been suffering from two years previously?

19. Why did Anne fly to the United States, and what happened soon after she arrived?

20. In reflecting on her life, at the end of the program Anne comments on living in a world that is 'a little less gross in its brutality'. Explain what you think she means by this.

## COLONIAL MALAYA

During the early decades of the 20th century the ruling English classes in Malaya led affluent and privileged lifestyles beyond those of most of the local, indigenous populace. Anne Deveson's English parents were part of this colonial scene.

- Write a magazine article about the typical lifestyle of an English family living in Malaya in the era between the two world wars, roughly 1919-1939. Illustrate it, where possible, with photographs or drawings of people, places and social events.
- Describe a day in the life of a British rubber plantation owner or manager in colonial Malaya. This may be presented in diary form, or as a documentary-style radio broadcast which could be recorded for playing on your school's intranet website.
- Discuss the plot, setting and character possibilities for a short fiction story in which you are a young son or daughter of English parents in 1930s colonial Malaya. Your story should also feature other characters who are part of the local Malayan population. (This activity may be combined with the following one.)
- Plan and write the same story from the point of view of one of the Malaysians in the story. You may wish first to discuss in class the ways in which interpretations, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and motivations, and the entire meaning of a story, may differ when presented from an alternative viewpoint.
- What is 'colonialism' and its purposes? In groups, research and discuss the positive and negative aspects of colonialism and why it is possible that eventually local resistance and independence groups will begin to organise themselves. Did this happen in Malaya before World War Two? Why or why not?

## ESCAPE TO AUSTRALIA

In the weeks preceding the Japanese military invasion of Malaya in 1942, Anglo-European colonials began to evacuate, fearing they would be captured, killed or sent to labour camps. Regarded as war refugees, many women, with their children, left their husbands behind and were sent to Western Australia, where they endured difficult living conditions.

■ As a class, research the events of the last weeks of British colonial rule in Malaya, 1941–1942, then prepare and record a current affairs 'on the spot' news broadcast of items. This may include news reports, interviews, propaganda information, government public advice announcements, and the latest passenger flight and shipping information for those intending to leave. It is not necessary to try to record the entire program at once; pieces may be recorded independently and edited together to create the impression of one, uninterrupted program.

■ Write a short story, or the script outline for a short drama film, about one family's flight from Malaya to Australia. You may also draw a storyboard for at least one scene for your script.

■ On arrival in Perth, Anne, her brother and mother, were sent to a farm where they shared a tin shack with other British refugees, and were expected to grow vegetables in very poor, drought-affected soil. We are told that Anne's mother was unsuited and unskilled for this kind of life. Imagine you are in this situation. Write a personal letter to a relative back 'home' (i.e. England) about your experiences.

## JOURNALISM CAREER

Anne's family returned to England after World War Two concluded, where after many unsuccessful applications to newspapers, she was offered a position as a cadet journalist with a small local newspaper in London. Her career in both the print and radio media developed, and some years later she returned to Australia.

■ Working in groups research what a career in journalism involves, the wide range of jobs in journalism, and whether the requirements and roles of a journalist have altered over the years from the mid-20th century to the present day, including the introduction, development and influence on journalism of television, the internet, and phone satellite technology as means of communication. What talents, abilities, interests, activities and education may be required to become a journalist? What kinds of professional study courses in journalism are available either nationally in Australia or in your home state? (See Selected References and Further Resources.) From your findings, work together to create a website for students at your school about careers in journalism.

■ Discuss the need for ethical standards for journalists in reporting, discussing, publishing and broadcasting news and current affairs. Find and discuss examples from current news reporting (newspapers, television and radio) that you consider ethically responsible and irresponsible. In small groups, create an 'unethical' newspaper, radio or television news story. How could it be re-presented in such a way that it appears as an example of responsible, ethical reporting? (It may be worthwhile to view the weekly ABC TV program, **Media Watch**, for practical examples.)

■ Research and prepare either a popular magazine item or a website presentation on the changing rules, regulations and roles for working for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, now renamed the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), from about the mid-20th century to the present. Include short biographies of the work of prominent ABC women broadcasters and journalists.

■ Write a short story or a script for a short TV drama about a woman who is an investigative journalist-reporter. The story may be presented as a thriller, a serious social-commentary drama or a comedy. Students may find ideas for topics and character-types by looking at a wide range of news stories in the daily newspapers and on TV news and current affairs programs.

## PERSONAL TRAGEDIES

Although Anne Deveson achieved great success in her professional life after returning to Australia, at a personal level she confronted serious emotional issues, such as the social stigma of living with broadcaster Ellis Blaine out of wedlock, abortion, her son's schizophrenia and his later suicide, and the death in the late 1990s of a close friend, English economist Robert Theobald.

■ Listen to the part in the program where Anne speaks about her life in Hobart in the late 1950s, her decision to have an abortion and the emotional conflict surrounding this decision. Using this as a starting point for ideas, plan two different versions of the one situation, where a woman is regarded by the community in which she lives as a social outcast. Tell the story first from her viewpoint and then from that of a member of her community. Present both stories to the class. The class may then discuss the validity of each point of view, discussing whether it is possible to stand in moral certainty and judgement over another's beliefs, actions and behaviour.

■ In groups, research the abortion laws in your state and prepare an informative report. Have the abortion laws changed over the years? If so, how and why? If not, why? Are laws prohibiting abortion likely to prevent the practice from occurring? Examine whether moral, ethical and religious concerns and beliefs are relevant in attempting to decide what the laws on abortion should be. Are terms such as 'liberal' laws and 'conservative' or 'repressive' laws useful and justified, or do they confuse the issue? (You may also wish to make comparisons between Australian states, and with other countries.)

■ In the 1960s and into the 1970s a Melbourne doctor, Bertram Wainer, found himself at the centre of a police corruption scandal involving Victoria's abortion laws. Working with other students, research and prepare a radio documentary about Wainer, the issue in which he was involved and the outcome of the scandal.

■ Write a fictional short story in which the abortion issue is relevant to the plot and to one or more characters; the story may be set in the past or in contemporary times.

■ In groups, research and prepare an informative social education booklet or website on schizophrenia, examining the realities and myths about this mental illness.

■ There are many movies about mental illness (e.g. **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**, Milos Forman 1975). If you search the internet you will find more titles. View one such film on DVD or video, and write a film review of it, in which part of your discussion features comments on how the film approaches the subject of mental illness – whether it perpetuates accepted myths or not, and whether it sensationalises, trivialises or fantasises the subject unrealistically.

■ Research the life and work of English economist Robert Theobald, and prepare a detailed biography about him either for magazine or website presentation.

■ Select at least one of Anne Deveson's published non-fiction books and write a review of it, discussing its contents, what you have learnt from it, what others may gain from reading it, and what you think it tells you about Anne's character, attitudes, beliefs and world view. If possible, also view one of Deveson's films and write a review of it, using similar questions to those for the book review.

## 'THE OMO LADY'

Serious social commentator of newspaper, radio and TV fame. Anne Deveson caused a stir when she suddenly appeared in a series of soap powder television commercials.

- Imagine you are the managing director of a soap powder company, looking for a famous Australian to advertise your product on TV. The famous Australian may be an actor, pop star, writer, media commentator, sportsperson, retired politician etc. Write a letter to the famous person (or their agent), asking them if they'd like to feature in your advertising campaign. Express in your letter the positive qualities they have (audience appeal, public reputation, believability and trustworthiness etc) which could be linked to the product being promoted. Indicate to them the roles or functions they may be expected to carry out (e.g. conduct mock interviews) and the amount of time they would be required to carry out their work. Describe the times of day or night the commercials would be screened (e.g. during an afternoon soap opera serial) and why. You may also wish to discuss the fee being offered, although this may be open to negotiation.
- Imagine you are the famous Australian of the previous exercise (or their agent). Write an answering letter.
- Working in pairs, plan a TV advertisement script for a soap powder featuring the famous Australian from the previous two exercises. Include a storyboard of the advertisement, indicating important visual, editing and sound elements. Using video equipment, your class working together may be able to produce and record one or more of the constructed advertisements, with students featuring in the main on-screen roles.

## THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

With Elizabeth Evatt and Felix Arnott, Anne Deveson was appointed a commissioner by the Whitlam Labor government to examine and report to the federal government the state of Australians' daily social conditions. Their wide-ranging recommendations, calling for reform to laws in areas such as the upbringing and rights of children, the age of consent, homosexuality, incest, contraception, family violence, abortion and rape, and exposing the social inequalities experienced by Aboriginal people, non-English migrants and women, immediately created a storm of controversy.

- Find out generally what royal commissions are, how they are conducted and the roles and power of commissioners. Present your findings in an informative essay or magazine article aimed at teenagers. Then research the findings of the Royal Commission on Human Relationships. Each student, or pair of students, should select one of the recommendations and either produce a wall poster explaining the recommendation, or present a short talk explaining it to the class. Students may wish to add a specific case example submitted in evidence at the Commission hearings. (See Selected References and Further Reading.)
- Continuing the above research, students may select a topic arising from the findings of the Commission, and report to the class on the extent of changes to laws in their state (and perhaps throughout Australia generally) since the Commission recommendations were published in 1977. If possible, discuss the extent to which reforms

or changes to laws have either been carried out or not carried out, and the reasons for this. Examine the views of organisations arguing either against changes to existing legislation or arguing in favour of alternatives to existing legislation, discussing the validity of their arguments.

- Write a fiction short story about a day or week in the life of a royal commissioner involved in the Human Relations Commission.
- Who are the other two royal commissioners associated with the Human Relations Commission – Elizabeth Evatt and Felix Arnott? Plan and present biographies of them, and Anne Deveson, for either a magazine, a website or large display posters.

## SELECTED REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

### Books

Works by Anne Deveson:

- Australians at Risk.** Cassell, Melbourne, 1978  
(contains recommendations of the Report of the Royal Commission on Human Relationships and edited selections of material submitted in evidence)
- Coming of Age: Twenty-one Interviews About Growing Older.** Scribe Publications, Newham, Vic, 1994
- Tell Me I'm Here.** Penguin Australia, 1998 (new edition)
- Lines in the Sand.** Penguin, 2000 (fiction)
- Resilience.** Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 2003

General:

- Judith Bessant and Rob Watts, **Sociology Australia.** Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1999
- John C. Butcher, **The British in Malaya 1880-1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia.** OUP, Kuala Lumpur, 1979
- Ethics in Journalism: Report of the Ethics Review Committee.** Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, Australian Journalists' Association, MUP, Melbourne, 1997
- Ken Inglis, **This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission 1923-1983.** MUP, Melbourne, 1983
- Gael Knepper, **Women of Power: Playing It By Their Own Rules.** Hutchinson Australia, Sydney, 1990
- Review of the Report of the Royal Commission on Human Relationships.** prepared on behalf of the Catholic Social Welfare Commission, Polding House, Sydney, 1979
- Tonia K. Shamoo and Philip G. Patros, **Helping Your Child Cope with Depression and Suicidal Thoughts.** Lexington Books, 1990 (Previously published as **I Want to Kill Myself**)
- Margaret Shennan, **Out in the Midday Sun: The British in Malaya 1880-1960.** John Murray, London, 2000
- Bertram Wainer, **It Isn't Nice.** Alpha Books, Sydney, 1972
- Kate Williams, **A Parent's Guide for Suicidal and Depressed Teens.** Hazelden, Minnesota, 1995

## Films

Anne Deveson (director), **Spinning Out** (documentary about schizophrenia, 1992; program and study guide available from Film Australia)

Jessica Douglas-Henry (director), **Our Brother James** (documentary about the impact of youth suicide, 2001; program and study guide available from Film Australia)

John Moore (director), **Abortion, Corruption and Cops—The Bertram Wainer Story** (documentary about Bertram Wainer's campaign for abortion law reform, 2005; program and study guide available from Film Australia)

## Websites

Australian abortion law:

[www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/1998-99/99rp01.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/1998-99/99rp01.htm)

[www.spinneypress.com.au/213\\_book\\_desc.html](http://www.spinneypress.com.au/213_book_desc.html)

[www.aic.gov.au/conferences/medicine/grundmann.pdf](http://www.aic.gov.au/conferences/medicine/grundmann.pdf)

British colony of Malaya

<http://pages.britishlibrary.net/empirehist/resources.htm>

[www.huaren.org/diaspora/asia/malaysia/racehis.html](http://www.huaren.org/diaspora/asia/malaysia/racehis.html)

General issues about human relationships in Australian society:

[www2.rz.hu-berlin.de/sexology/GESUND/ARCHIV/IES/AUSTRAL.HTM](http://www2.rz.hu-berlin.de/sexology/GESUND/ARCHIV/IES/AUSTRAL.HTM)

Journalist code of ethics:

[www.alliance.org.au/hot/ethicscode.htm](http://www.alliance.org.au/hot/ethicscode.htm)

[www.australian-news.com.au/codethics.htm](http://www.australian-news.com.au/codethics.htm)

Journalism (career information service)

[www.myfuture.edu.au](http://www.myfuture.edu.au)

Mental health issues:

[www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

<http://cms.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters>

[www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info)

[www.chovil.com](http://www.chovil.com)

Robert Theobald:

<http://main.nrg.com.au/~connect/obituary.htm>

[www.scottlondon.com/insight/scripts/theobald.html](http://www.scottlondon.com/insight/scripts/theobald.html)

Royal Commission on Human Relationships—1978 opinion poll:

<http://assda.anu.edu.au/polls/D0265.html>