

arts

What lies beneath a murder

cover
STORY

DAVID COHEN

Walk the streets of Subiaco and you might glimpse Willa Samson.

Willa is an amateur historian who's been through intense personal trauma. She's reclusive and lives with a cat in a house like those close to Subi's train station.

"It's an old house with a bullnose verandah and wisteria," says Amanda Curtin.

"There's an old garage at the back and a big backyard. Willa doesn't drive, so she uses public transport."

Willa is the protagonist of Amanda's first novel, *The Sinkings*. The character's western suburbs home is the base for an extraordinary story that melds historical fact and vivid fiction, crossing centuries, continents and genders.

The Sinkings opens with a brutal murder that really happened near Albany in 1882. A man known as Little Jock is bludgeoned to death with an axe.

But the surgeon who performed the autopsy claimed Little Jock's remains were those of a woman.

What's going on? More than a hundred years later, the fictional Willa Samson



■ Amanda Curtin's first novel is an extraordinary story.

resolves to discover the truth behind the murdered person – and also wrestles with her own demons, which are related to Little Jock's story.

Amanda's creative spark was fired when she heard a talk by one of the co-authors of a convict dictionary.

"It's hard to determine exactly how many convicts came to WA: it's usually estimated at around 10,000," Amanda said.

"They were all required by the agreement between the Swan River Colony and the British government

to be male, but she said, 'of course, one might have been a woman'.

"That stuck in my mind and I thought about it for a long time. I always knew I would like to find out, and write about, this convict who might have been a woman."

Back in the 1880s there was speculation Little Jock was what was then called a hermaphrodite.

"When I started to look into what being a hermaphrodite in the 19th century meant, I came across stories about what their treatment had been

Doctors would decide at birth what was the most appropriate gender for the child, and it was nearly always based on the genitals

like," Amanda said.

"I was fascinated to learn more about how that condition works."

It was tough being of indeterminate sex in the 19th century; people with the condition sometimes ended up as fairground freaks.

In the 20th century things changed for the condition that's become known as intersex, but not necessarily for the better.

"Doctors would decide at birth what was the most appropriate gender for the child, and it was nearly always based on the genitals," Amanda said.

"They often disregarded the reproductive organs, the chromosomes, everything. They would fashion the child surgically into what they deemed was appropriate. The parents were then told to go home and reinforce that through social conditioning."

This is vividly depicted in *The Sinkings*. Willa has an intersex child and she and her husband deliberate over names for boy and girl babies – but what do you call a child about whose sex you're unsure?

"A lot's changed since the 1980s, because of activism

by intersex people who said it was a damaging way of dealing with their condition," Amanda said.

"There was a lot of secrecy involved, a lot of lies. The children had a lot of questions and not many answers were given to them."

Writer Suzanne Kessler once said: "It's not intersex that's life-threatening to the child, but it is threatening to the child's culture."

Amanda said: "That's a good quote because there was a well-meaning drive by doctors and parents who wanted the best for the child."

"They wanted their child to fit in. Unfortunately it seems from the testimony given by adult inter-sexuals it hasn't been successful."

"Many said they didn't fit in, and they were subjected to a lot of

surgery and pain and difficulty in their lives."

The Sinkings is a new direction for Amanda. She's won several awards for her short story writing, including the Katherine Susannah Prichard Short Fiction Award.

Her new novel is her first extended piece of creative writing and meant a lot of research as well as imagination.

"It was a challenge and a wonderful experience," she said. "There was a year of research. I went to Glasgow, because Little Jock was convicted there, but then I found out he was born in Northern Ireland, so I had to go there too."

Despite the challenges, looking at the world from a fictional character's point of view was energising.

"To walk the streets your characters walked, to go to the places they lived, is a very inspiring thing for a writer to do."

The Sinkings, \$24.95, is in stores from Monday, July 21.



They want to be Big

The quest continues for *The Next Big Thing* and the semi-finals of WA's richest original music competition this Saturday will feature local group Panama.

The five mates who are Panama – Lorry Valentini, Rob

Vacca, Matt Stanton Johnson, Steve Vacca and Dan O'Connor – recently won the western suburbs competition, Ampfest – Clash of the Bands.

They will line up with in *The Next Big Thing* semi-finals on Saturday, July 19, at the

Rosemount Hotel in North Perth.

Their competition includes Jordi James, *The Lazy Railway*, *Injured Ninja* and *The Typhoons*.

The doors open at 7pm and entry is \$10. The grand final is also at the Rosemount, on Saturday, July 26.



■ Jordi James.

Have you ever given a gift that is considered a keepsake?



Is someone you love celebrating a major milestone? Not sure what to give them as a gift? Perhaps we can help.

At *Remembering When* we use your stories (which we collect through interviews), scan your photographs and draw on your favourite music, to craft audio-visual, written and scrapbooking items that bridge the gap between the past and the present.

In a way, we're like a 21st century equivalent of an heirloom quilt that might have had portions stitched by different family members over time.

If you'd like to find how we can help you to give a keepsake for your next gift, call Neil or Ayomi on 6380 1921. Alternatively, please feel free to visit our website at www.rememberingwhen.com.au.

ANDREW MCKINNON PRESENTS

STEVEN
BERKOFF

ONEMAN

HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE
3 – 5 OCTOBERBOOKINGS: (08) 9484 1133
www.bocsticketing.com.au