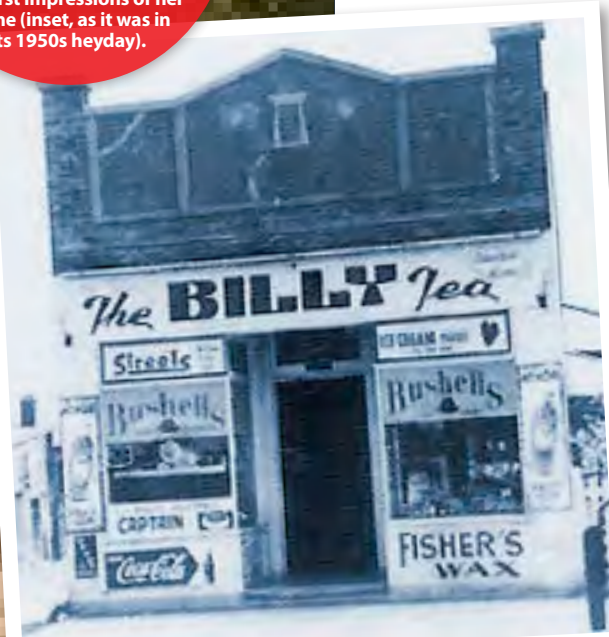


Living in a HOUSE OF HORROR

From a vintage dame to a stinking miner, the past haunted a mother and daughter's quaint seaside home



HAUNTED BY HISTORY
 "I could feel there was something here, but told myself, 'It's an old house, there's a lot of history,'" recalls Nell Jones (near left, with daughter Caitlin on Aug. 12) of her first impressions of her home (inset, as it was in its 1950s heyday).



Nell Jones is level-headed and practical, but she has no explanation for the events that took over her home in a beachside suburb of Newcastle, NSW, in the early to mid-2000s. What began as a nocturnal symphony of knocks and slams culminated in Nell, a primary-school teacher and novelist, seeing large-as-life ghosts. "They've always been very clear," says Nell, 47, mother of student Caitlin, 22. "You know that they are not flesh and blood, but they seem dense enough to take up the space." The following is an extract from WHO senior editor Karina Machado's nonfiction book about Australian hauntings, *Where Spirits Dwell*.

The middle-aged woman sat in a chair in Nell Jones's TV room. Her posture was impeccable, her knees forming a perfect tabletop for a china teacup and saucer, if her host would be so kind. Her hair was pinned into a French roll and she wore a cardigan over a beautiful yellow sundress with cornflowers embroidered along its hem. She turned her head to look at Nell.

Nell had not been dozing. She'd been upright on her favourite velour couch laughing along with a sitcom. She was not afraid. "I said, 'Good evening, are you enjoying the show?'" recalls Nell. "I closed my eyes and thought when I open them again, she'll be gone, but no, there she was, just watching TV with me."

In 2000, when Nell left Sydney and bought her century-old house in Newcastle, she could not have known that within two years, the quaint, former general store with attached two-bedroom cottage would be swarming with ghosts. Life was peaceful at first for the divorcée and Caitlin, then 9. But in late 2002, Nell began to notice a "rancid" smell in the house, which had seemingly come alive. Doors slammed, floor-

boards groaned, tables danced, lights darted and foot-steps wandered. Soon, disembodied fingers tapped on the keyboard. At this point "the 1940s lady" materialised in vivid hues that branded her forever onto Nell's mind's eye—this was no shadow nudging her peripheral vision, but a voluptuous

stranger taking her ease in Nell's sitting room. "She might have belonged to one of the families that have lived here," Nell suggests. "This suburb is one where families stay for generations." Nell saw her again, but was unperturbed by her clean and pressed presence, unlike the "stink-bomb miner" who manifested next. This stumpy, filthy man with an unkempt beard had soured her home with the smell she'd detected earlier. Explaining that a nearby coal mine was closed in the 1800s after nine men died, Nell wonders if he had a connection to the house.

Reflection came later. In the thick of the haunting, Nell was a drowning woman struggling to stay afloat. Random corners of the house turned into columns of ice or fizzed with static charge—"Your hair would stand on end"—their cat began to hiss at the air and more apparitions joined the throng. In the backyard, a pair of Aboriginal girls in threadbare white dresses played a long forgotten game, while inside, "you could see them, smell them, hear their voices at night," says Nell. "Sometimes

"You could see them, smell them, hear their voices at night"

—teacher Nell Jones

you could hear a radio from another time. It was really bad. We were on the alert."

It was time to call in help. "The atmosphere got too violent, things were missing and my daughter was terrified to go to sleep at night," says Nell, who contacted ghostbuster

Robb Tilley, public officer of the Australian Institute of Parapsychological Research.

When Robb, a psychic who helps everyday people struggling with a haunting, arrived in 2005 he burst out laughing, declaring, "My God, the place is packed with ghosts!" For six hours he coaxed ghosts to the light with his spirit offiders. He explained that a couple of "older ones" would not budge—Nell believes they are Lil Fairless, the original shop owner, and her niece, Ilma, who remain for love of a building that housed their hopes and heart-break, or their affinity with the people who shelter within it.

Yet the voices from the past can never be hushed entirely. The night of the clearing, she packed up the family for a trip to Tamworth. The house stood vacant for days, but when they returned Nell's alarm bells rang at the sight of five sticks arranged outside the front door, laid out neatly from smallest to largest. Blaming it on kids, she stepped in to the house—and heard herself whimper. "It was the same stick arrangement on the other side of the door," recounts Nell. "Nobody had been here."

"It was eerie," says Caitlin, troubled. "Like something out of a movie, like *The Blair Witch*



People usually call Robb Tilley (with Caitlin and Nell) at their home as a last resort.

Project. You're actually making me remember all this because I'd blocked a lot of it out. It was just so scary to even think that this was actually happening to me."

Her mother rang Robb in a fluster. He advised her to see it as the indigenous spirits acknowledging her efforts in honouring the Aboriginal girl they're both certain is buried in the backyard, resting in the shadow of a gangly gum tree. Now, when Nell is in the yard, weeding or watering, she always greets her charge, points out what she is doing, describes the clouds skittering across the sky, whispers about the night soon descending to tuck her into the earth and the native plants that guard her.

Today, the general store, where almost a century ago children jostled to buy home-made ginger ice lollies, is a serene studio where Nell works and reflects. Two red leather couches and a weathered timber table create a cosy space, where paintings line the walls and books—to paraphrase author Jeanette Winterson—are stacked like sandbags against the outside world, or against the harbingers of the past. "I don't want to see them again," says Nell. For this is the way she likes it, when her house is her domain and its history reaches out only in her imagination; where a woman in a yellow sundress smiles, as alive as any of her studies in oil, then retreats meekly into the recesses of her mind. ■

An edited extract from *Where Spirits Dwell*, by Karina Machado (Hachette Australia, \$32.99), out in September.

