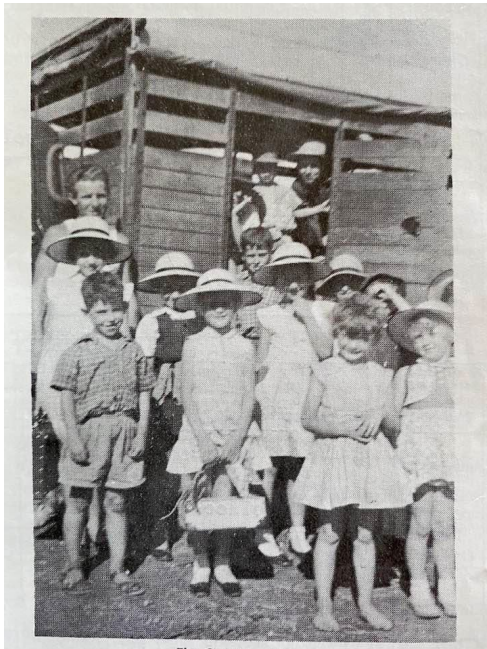


## The story behind Alex

Until I was six, I lived on a sheep farm in the Wattle Range area, South East, SA. Then we moved to Central QLD. I grew up on a mixed-farming and grazing property during a long drought near a tiny town called Banana. I attended a one teacher primary school and went to school on a converted cattle truck for almost an hour, picking up students from all the properties. A few children lived in Banana and they walked up to the school.



On Saturdays I had the job of watering a small rose garden with bore water. I had to hold the hose at all times. But I liked to read, and you need to put the hose down to turn pages or they get wet. One day my brother caught me not holding the hose and boy was I in trouble. No one was allowed to waste water. I was last in the bath and Mum washed my hair once a week. On Sunday I wore a ponytail but by Friday I wore plaits so no one could see my hair was dirty. No one was allowed to have showers or let a tap run – I washed my hands in a bowl.



Mum and Dad often had quiet conversations about the drought, but they looked worried.

I liked walking on our property with my kelpie-cross dog, Teddy. I climbed the windmill to draw and sometimes rode a horse. I saw the sea once a year. I never wore a raincoat or used an umbrella. Most importantly, I learned never to waste water.

The ideas for Alex came from my own experience of growing up during drought. At the beginning of 2020, I began journaling, collecting images and information while finishing off another writing project. I knew the Flinders Ranges area and chose to set Alex's story there. I was also familiar with many of the towns in the area. Relatives of my husband lived on a farm

near Orroroo; our friends lived near Quorn. I visited Leigh Creek on a Premier's Reading Challenge trip after I went to Arkaroola. I've been to Beltana, Maree and Farina, and ate at a pub that serves outback food. Then in 2021 I visited Hawker Area School during Bookweek. I'm indebted to the staff and students at Hawker, especially Ailsa Green and Leticia for giving me ideas. I decided to set the novel near a fictitious town that was a lot like the country towns I knew.

Many people told me it was not an easy task to write during COVID-19. I found that I could write but my story was darker than usual. I soon came to realise with editor Lyn's suggestions that *Alex* needed to be rewritten with more light, passion and joy.

