

The Heart Garden : Sunday Reed and Heide

by Janine Burke

The Heart Garden : Sunday Reed and the garden at Heide by Janine Burke is published by [Random House Australia](#).

It is an evocative rendering of one of the most interesting and fruitful periods of Australian art and is an engaging biography of a captivating woman, Sunday Reed.



THERESE SCOTT: Your fascinating new book *The Heart Garden* centres on the life and work of Sunday Reed. How would you describe Sunday Reed, a woman from a well to do family who broke some social rules and found herself at the centre of one of this country's most important periods of art?

JANINE BURKE: Sunday was an immensely complex woman: passionate, beautiful, highly sensitive, committed to what she believed in and a real visionary about Australian art. She grew up a princess in an upper class Edwardian world, a world of wealth and privilege, where girls were definitely meant to be seen and not heard. Sunday rebelled against the strictures of that life. She was determined to have a freer existence where women had the same opportunities as men – to make art, to travel and study, to marry, to take lovers, to express themselves in any way they chose. She was a rebel and a rule breaker. She took herself seriously and had no wish to be a dilettante.

Why was Heide such a vital place for the arts?

JB:: Sunday and her husband John opened their doors to young, cutting-edge artists from the 1930s until the 1970s. Albert Tucker told me that Sunday was "the eye, the focus" of the Heide group. She drew very diverse people together, it was a skill of hers. The artists were keen to hear Sunday's comments on their art, they wanted her support and belief in them. Sunday opened her purse, too. If an artist that she believed in – like Tucker or Joy Hester – needed money for rent, food or art materials, then Sunday would shower them what they needed. Her financial support went on for decades. Sunday wasn't afraid of a good argument. She didn't believe in everyone being nice and well-behaved, in fact she encouraged debate about important issues in Australian culture, the louder the better! Her main concern was that Australia create its own culture and not become a secondhand version of Britain or Europe. She had high standards. It could drive people around her crazy. At the same time, it brought out the best in them.

TS: Sunday was very much an artist herself by creating the beautiful garden at Heide, a memorial to her love for Sidney Nolan and by one of the pioneers in gardening in Australia, Edna Walling.

JB:: The title of my book, *The Heart Garden*, takes its name from a heart-shaped garden that Sunday made after her decade long relationship with Sidney Nolan had ended. Just recently, we've restored this lovely little garden at Heide Museum of Modern Art where Sunday originally created it and we've planted it with some of her favourite herbs and flowers: forget-me-nots, chamomile and marguerite daisies.

Sunday was a keen and imaginative gardener. Much of her inspiration came from nature. She raced out to the garden each morning and spent most of her day there, working like a Trojan. She had some help but mostly it was just her and John. She was a real "greenie", concerned about the environment and a vegetarian decades before it was fashionable. She used to say "I don't like eating my friends". When she started work on the Heide garden in 1935, her ideas were informed by a taste for formal French gardens but later she became interested in the more lavish, romantic effects of English gardens.

Sunday was impressed by Edna Walling's book "The Australian Roadside" (1952) which emphasised the value of the local landscape. It made both Sunday and John realise that instead of planting exotics like oaks and birches, they should concentrate on hardier Australian varieties like eucalypts, that use less water and so are more environment-friendly.

TS: Sidney Nolan's hurtful book of verse *Paradise Garden* showed that his attempts at literature could be as dark as his art. Sunday said "...thank God you have not had an evil book written about you, bound in thick leather to preserve it for the library shelves.." (pg 403). Why did Nolan make his disgust so public?

JB:: That's a tricky one. Partly it had to do with the fact that Sunday would not return Nolan's famous Ned Kelly series to him and he wanted vengeance. Nolan painted the Kelly series on the dining room table at Heide. Not only was Sunday Nolan's lover, she was also his muse, mentor and studio assistant, helping him to paint sections of some paintings. When Nolan left in 1948, Sunday was heart broken. Soon after Nolan married John's sister, Cynthia, who loathed Sunday. It was all terribly incestuous. *Paradise Garden* was published more than twenty years later but it shows Nolan's feelings were still festering. I think he was furious that Sunday refused to leave John and go off with him. He remained in love with her but it was the dark side of love – obsession, fury, the desire to cause pain – and he couldn't control it. *Paradise Garden* didn't bury Nolan's affair with Sunday. It kept it alive and in the public eye.

TS: Do you think that art means as much nowadays ie: could this golden, creative period of art at Heide be replicated or was it a product of the times?

JB:: Today artists don't have to rely on patrons as they did back then – and that's lucky because they're few and far between! Firstly, there are more jobs available for artists in art schools and that is one way to survive. Plus the Australia Council and other government agencies offer some level of support and funding. In those years, the Reeds were a bright beacon of philanthropy. The Heide circle was a product of its times. The art produced then with its sense of urgency also related to the pressures of the war years. In 1942, Australia was under attack by the Japanese. Today I think Australian culture has never been healthier or more exciting or adventurous. We don't need Heide to be replicated. We need fresh, energetic and original energies. There are plenty of wild young artists out there, making the culture over in their own image. Good luck to them!

Interview on 19th November 2004 with Janine Burke by Therese Scott, Reader Services Librarian, Ashfield Municipal Library.