

# FROM THE WILDERNESS

**NON-FICTION  
SHADOW IN THE FOREST  
LEIGH SWINBOURNE,  
GINNINDERRA PRESS,  
\$32.99**



Looking for the perfect novel to take on your Tasmanian wilderness escape this summer? Local writer Leigh Swinbourne's *Shadow in the Forest* certainly sets the mood for a nature-based expedition and would be a great one to take along on a multi-day hike, as long as you do not mind a few shivers down your spine.

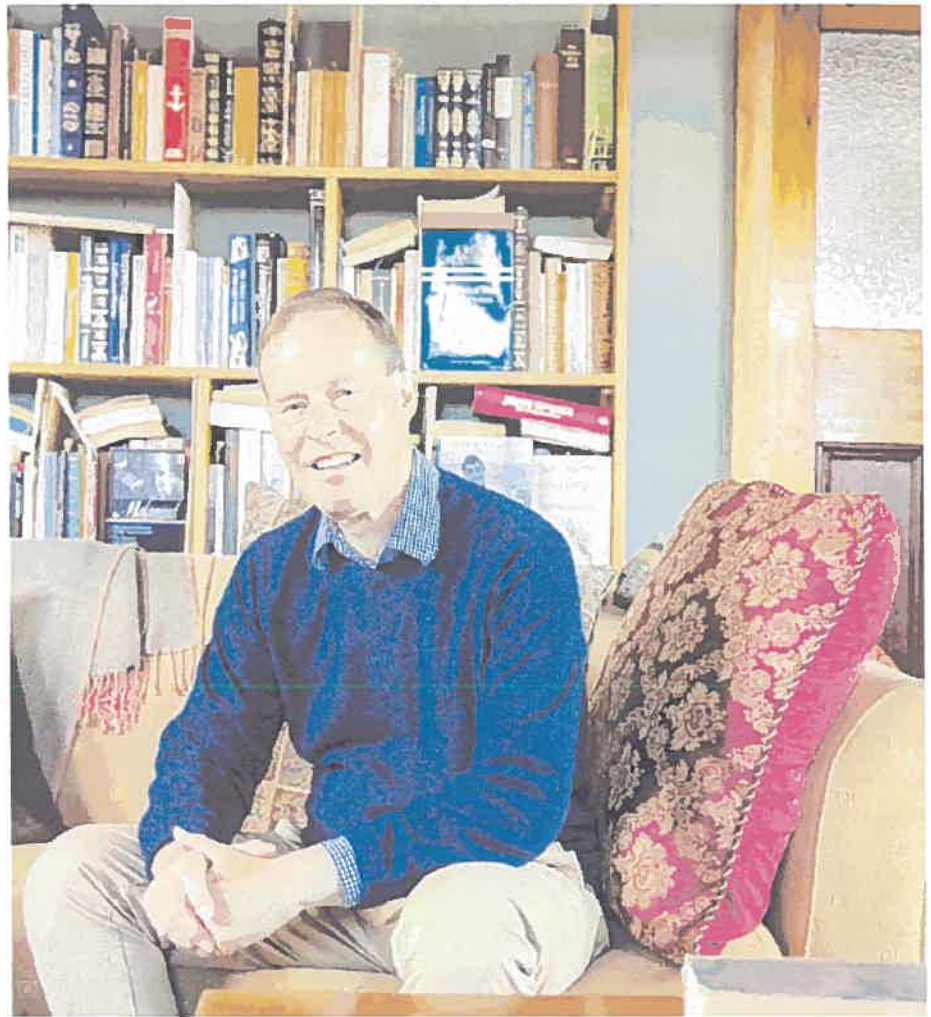
Set in the 1980s after the successful campaign to save the Franklin, it is a story about promising young zoologist Evelyn, who has been assigned to study the impact of bushwalkers on fauna in the Walls of Jerusalem National Park. During her period of isolation in the forest, which Evelyn relishes for the most part, she encounters a thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger, presumed extinct.

Evelyn is reluctant to radio through her discovery to colleagues until she is certain that what she has seen is in fact a tiger and not a dog or other feral animal. Here Evelyn's complex feelings about her mother, a famous environmentalist, come into play. Evelyn knows that photographic proof of the animal's existence would make her own career and help her break free of the expectations and assumptions that have dogged her throughout her working journey.

As the tiger becomes used to Evelyn being in its domain, a form of companionship develops between them as she goes about her daily duties of tracking wallabies and making notes. Evelyn has clearly been craving this kind of primal contact, which is free from the dramas and disappointment of so many of her human-to-human relationships. Too late and to Evelyn's dismay, she comes to realise how surely she is helping to spell doom for the creature.

In early scenes set around Launceston and Hobart, Swinbourne establishes the political backdrop to his tale as Evelyn meets characters including her supervisor, a university professor, and a young Wilderness Society campaigner who is also a fellow researcher and potential love interest. However, most of the drama takes place in the wilderness and, to a large part, inside Evelyn's mind.

As she treks into the mountains she contemplates what she wants out of life and ponders her personal problems such as whether to pursue further academic studies once back home in Sydney and how to break



Hobart author Leigh Swinbourne at home.

Picture: RICHARD JUPE

off with her boyfriend.

Swinbourne's descriptions of the scenery and ever-changing emotions that come with venturing into the elements are evocative. Bushwalkers will be familiar with how the Tasmanian landscape can be transformed by light and form, as though through some "mystical or supernatural occurrence" as Swinbourne describes it. As she journeys solo through the national park, Evelyn reflects on her own insignificance in the grandeur, experiencing feelings from elation to dread:

"The scale and particularly the randomness disturb her. For she is also a part of this nature, but vitally different; a living organism with passion and independent will, imagined purpose, a miracle herself, to herself and, like every organism, for herself the centre of the world. Yet she is virtually nothing in this slow aleatory gigantism, passing sunlight on grass, dust to dust."

Evelyn sinks into a momentary funk, before

pulling herself out of it and again enjoying the invigorating the wilderness: "As the sun imperceptibly descends in the clear open sky, an uncanny red-gold glows from the hills and pools as though they are sources of light as well as the sun. In this heightened atmosphere, Evelyn can distinctly perceive every separate minute detail on the craggy massive cliffs of the pass she will climb through tomorrow. The extent and the precision of the detail, even more than the beautiful coppery light, give the scene a powerful otherworldliness."

Swinbourne, who is from Sydney but has lived in Hobart with his family since 2001, has created a novel that captures the essence of Tasmania's recent environmental history.

He challenges us to face ethical problems that arise from our desire to intrude on wild places and reminds us we are just fleeting lifeforms on an ancient planet.

— SALLY GLAETZER