



After a life in newspapers, Bruce Guthrie has bared his soul in a revealing new book writes CORRIE PERKIN.

**T**he first thing cadet reporters are taught when they enter a newsroom is how to identify a good news story.

Enter the "Man Bites Dog" principle, which works like this: if a dog bites a man, that's not news. But if a man bites a dog, then hold the front page.

A couple of months ago Bruce Guthrie was mulling over titles for his new memoir. Nothing gelled, although he kept coming back to the "Man Bites Dog" line. Only weeks earlier Guthrie had taken Rupert Murdoch's News Limited to court over an unfair dismissal claim – and won. The former *Herald Sun* editor-in-chief, who was sacked unexpectedly in November 2008, suddenly found himself a hot news story. He was the man who'd bitten a dog.

But the title nagged at him. "I was playing around with the 'man bites dog' thing, but I'd reached a dead end," he recalls. Then one Saturday morning while driving his 16-year-old son Scott to tennis, Guthrie asked for advice. "Scotty just came out with it. 'Dad, how about *Man Bites Murdoch*?' I nearly drove off the road, it was that good."

*Man Bites Murdoch: Four Decades in Print, Six Days in Court* was originally going to be a book about journalism and the future of newspapers. Guthrie had discussed this idea with Melbourne University Publishing boss Louise Adler, a savvy publisher who is always on the lookout for contemporary newsmakers who can write. But as a court case seemed inevitable, the book changed its tack and Guthrie's editor's instinct kicked in. "One of my guiding philosophies in newspapers has always been that Noah is a better story than flood control," Guthrie explains. "In other words, use the person to get to the nub of the issue, to explain the issue. When I started thinking about the things I wanted to talk about in the book, I realised that I actually knew the person who could tell the story about newspapers in Australia and the changes they have gone through, and that person was me."

Guthrie's reporting career started in 1972. "I was there when *The Herald* was a successful afternoon paper,



# A BITE IN THE TALE

I was there when Rupert took over the Herald and Weekly Times, I was at *The Age* during young Warwick Fairfax's time, and I was there for the arrival of the internet and its impact on papers and journalism. And I saw how newspaper executives didn't plan for the future and didn't foresee the challenges ahead."

Bruce Robert Guthrie v News Limited went to court in late April with Justice Stephen Kaye presiding over the case. Suddenly the Guthrie story had drama and tension. Corporate heavyweights entered the witness box and provided colourful copy. In one of those strange twists, the worst week in Guthrie's life also provided the guts of his book.

The result is a well-crafted story that is part memoir and part reportage. Guthrie's critics – and there are plenty in Australian political and journalistic circles – will condemn it as one man's skewed view of his public sacking and the subsequent court case. Others will applaud its contribution to the media debate and



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"It actually came very easily. I'd get letters from people like (the then editor-in-chief) Les Carlyon saying 'I didn't know you could write, mate'."

We are sitting in a café not far from the house he and wife Janne Apelgren – also a journalist – bought just a few weeks before he was sacked. Broadmeadows-born Guthrie, who was also the editor of *The Sunday Age* and *The Age*, looks younger than his 56 years. He certainly appears fitter than when we last talked newspapers three years ago in the *Herald Sun* editor's plush office that overlooks the Arts Centre.

"So many good things have come out of what happened in November 2008," he reflects.

Like what? "I was able to spend a lot of time with my mother in the last year of her life – time that I wouldn't have otherwise had." Guthrie's mother Ruby, a respected and much-loved former nurse, died on November 22, 2009, one year after her son had been sacked.

In late 2006 Guthrie, Apelgren and their two children were living in Sydney when News' chief executive John Hartigan first mooted the *Herald Sun* editorship. A decade earlier the family had left Melbourne for New York after Guthrie had resigned from *The Age* following some spectacular boardroom interplay. The return to Melbourne after some happy years in Sydney was an upheaval, but it brought the family geographically closer to Ruby.

In his book, Guthrie reflects that in her last weeks, Ruby encouraged her youngest son to fight News Limited "all the way to court, if it came to that. We would console ourselves by acknowledging that whatever the outcome of the case, my shift to Melbourne had brought us together again and given us these precious final days".

The break from newspapers also allowed Guthrie to spend more time with his children. Last year Susannah, his eldest, was captain of her school; each day Guthrie drove her to school and was able to attend all the important year 12 events. He acknowledges that if he'd still been at the *Herald Sun*, those times would have been very rare.

"It's been a wonderful period of my life and I'm sure I'm closer to my kids as a result," he says.

Having a stay-at-home husband has also been a bonus for Apelgren, who last year was appointed editor of *The Age Good Food Guide*. "Another great thing to have come out of all this is that Janne's career can now flourish," Guthrie says. "She's a great journalist who's had to put her career on hold because of my commitments. Now it's her turn to do something she loves."

Regular fill-in work on 774 ABC radio has kept Guthrie in the public arena and his name is often mentioned as a successor to various talk-show hosts, including the ABC's Jon Faine and Richard Stubbs, and 3AW morning host Neil Mitchell. He may write another book (subject unknown), and he attracts the occasional online and publishing offers.

Having emerged from the Supreme Court in May with nearly \$600,000 plus costs, Guthrie doesn't need to make any career decisions. He admits this is an unusual feeling for someone who has spent most of the past 40 years thinking about the next edition, the next day's stories, the next move.

Guthrie sorely missed newspaper editing in the months after his snappy departure from *The Age* in 1997. This time around, he seems reconciled to his new position as an outsider looking in. "I'm not sure when my career as a newspaper editor ended," he writes in the book. "Was it November 10, 2008, the day I was summarily dismissed, or was it May 14, 2010, the day the judge found I shouldn't have been? It was probably somewhere in between."

He continues: "For some time I was bitter about that, but then I realised I had had the best of the industry's very best years. I had entered it when new titles were being launched and I left, albeit with a boot up the bum, as mastheads were disappearing around the globe. It was hard to be bitter about having worked at such a high level in the industry for so long."

Guthrie has edited three Melbourne papers. In the late 1990s and early 2000s he edited *Who Weekly*, then in 2004 he joined News Limited as editor of *The Weekend Australian Magazine*. He would have been happy to stay in Sydney, but the *Herald Sun* gig's allure was too strong.

In a 2007 interview just a few months after Guthrie's move back to Melbourne, John Hartigan told me he felt "Bruce was a person who totally understood that (Melbourne) community and that was a significant benefit. He had the experience to make the judgments we think are important in a role like that."

Post-court case, Guthrie is still furious about the way *Herald Sun* managing director Peter Blunden handled their relationship. But he still has nice things to say about Hartigan. "I'm grateful to John Hartigan because he gave me some great opportunities, and I'll never forget that." Recalling that fateful November day, he says, "Although I think he made errors of judgment, part of me still likes John Hartigan."

In his recent autobiography *My Paper Chase*, former London *Times* editor Harold Evans writes "Rupert's macho management who would rather be caught dead than having second thoughts". Reading Guthrie's account of 2008's events, you wonder whether some News Limited executives perhaps convinced themselves that an intervention or investigation into claims against their editor might have been seen as having second thoughts, and therefore unacceptable.

Of News Limited's culture, Guthrie says: "One observation I'd like to make is that much of the book is written out of sorrow, not anger. I've moved well past anger. On reflection, there is a cultural problem at News Limited, and I think that's a problem, given the enormous power they have in the Australian media."

"It's a company that's interested in outcomes not processes, and I think their businesses would be improved if they spent more time working on processes. Without proper processes you end up with the (recent) phone-hacking scandal in London, and the Melbourne Storm issue and, to some extent, the issue with me."

Guthrie hopes his book "and others like it might educate people so they do start to expect better behavior from their publishers and editors and journalists. And if that happens, then we will have a better democracy." [editorial@theweeklyreview.com.au](mailto:editorial@theweeklyreview.com.au)

► *Man Bites Murdoch* by Bruce Guthrie (Melbourne University Press)

be prompted to reflect upon issues such as the future of newspapers, Rupert Murdoch, News Limited's tough-guy culture, and editors who present news without fear or favour.

"You're a lovely writer," I tell Guthrie on the eve of the book's launch. "What a pity you were stuck in the editor's office for so many years."

Guthrie laughs, then guesses he was probably 10 years into his career before any kind of creative writing talent emerged. "Until I went to America (in the mid-1980s as *The Herald's* west coast correspondent) I was your classic *Herald* reporter. Every paragraph could have no more than 25 words, you had to have your most important information in your first paragraph, watch the adjectives – that kind of thing. But the great skill *The Herald* taught me was speed and grace under pressure. It gave me an economy of words, but it didn't teach me how to write."

During his US stint Guthrie wrote a weekly column.

**Right at home:** A break from editing newspapers has given Bruce Guthrie plenty to smile about. (NEIL BENNETT)