

# Immigrant Chronicle

by Peter Skrzynecki

## About the Author

Peter Skrzynecki was born on 6 April 1945 in Ihmert, near Dortmund, in Westphalia in northern Germany. Four years later, his parents migrated to Australia. Arriving at Sydney, the Skrzyneckis were sent by train to Bathurst. This would have been a further strain on their immigrant experience as Sydney was a well-known international destination but the bush and a country town, such as Bathurst, would have been unknown locations. They were housed in a migrant detention centre for a fortnight and then went to Parkes, to another hostel, for two years. Hostels had a prison-like appearance and organisation which could have been disturbing for immigrants from Europe after World War II where prison camps were common. Skrzynecki reflects these emotions in 'Migrant hostel'. In 1951 the family moved to Sydney where Skrzynecki's father worked as a labourer for the Water Board. They lived at 10 Mary Street, Regents Park, in Sydney's south-western suburbs, the subject of one of the set poems.

Skrzynecki had a Catholic education at Blessed Peter Chanel primary school at Regents Park and later at St Patrick's College, Strathfield (the subject of another set poem). He has retained his faith as his collection of poems, *Easter Sunday* (1993), testifies.

Skrzynecki qualified as a teacher and was posted to one-teacher country schools in northern New South Wales for three years. He returned to Sydney in 1970, married in 1971 and had two children. After divorcing, he remarried in 1980 and had a third child, a daughter. While teaching, Skrzynecki took an external degree from the University of New England and eventually a Master of Arts degree from the University of Sydney and, finally, a Master of Letters degree (a further postgraduate qualification in literature) from New England. He stopped school teaching in 1987, taking a lecturer's position at the University of Western Sydney.

Skrzynecki began writing poetry as an undergraduate at the University of Sydney in 1964. His collection, *Immigrant Chronicle*, was published in 1975 and is dedicated to Brian Couch and Tony Garnett. Couch was Skrzynecki's final year English teacher and Garnett was a gifted student, a year ahead of Skrzynecki at school. *The Polish Immigrant* (1982) also deals with the experience of the Skrzynecki family's immigration to Australia (his father was of Polish extraction). In this vein

too is Skrzynecki's edition of *Joseph's Coat: an anthology of multicultural writing* (1985). Skrzynecki's collection of stories, *The Wild Dogs*, was published in 1987 and his novel, *The Beloved Mountain*, in 1988. Another novel, *The Cry of the Goldfinch*, appeared in 1996 and a further collection of poetry, *Time's Revenge*, in 2000. For a detailed interview with Peter Skrzynecki see Barry Spurr, *Peter Skrzynecki*, Pascal Press, Sydney, 2000.

## Key Issues

- Consider how the concept of belonging is conveyed in Skrzynecki's poetry. Think about the speaker of each poem and how he conveys his relationship to people, places and experiences.
- Think about the assumptions underlying the representation of belonging in Skrzynecki's poems. How important is the sense of the writer's experience as an immigrant in a strange culture? Or is the individuality of the speaker—apart from any cultural differences—the essence of his often troubled sense of not belonging?
- Consider the poet's use of language. In this area of study do not confine yourself to talking about the themes of the poems. Focus on how language is used—not only on what it says—to convey the speaker's experience of belonging or not belonging. Look at vocabulary, imagery, portraits of other figures and dramatic representations of experiences and situations.
- Examine the poet's evaluation of belonging. Is Skrzynecki's representation of belonging always negative? Is his speaker always an outsider? We are not required to automatically accept that the speaker's evaluation of his experiences is justified. Do you relate to what he describes or do you find the apprehensions overstated or even self-indulgent? Argue your case.
- Consider your own understanding of belonging. How do these poems and the experiences they evoke relate, if at all, to your own experience of belonging in family, at school, in society?