

The Advertiser



📷 Historian and author Jeffrey Grey

SA Lifestyle

I wrote every sentence with Jeff in mind. Now he'll never read it

Mark Dapin, SA Weekend
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SURPRISINGLY – since I am an idiot – I am writing a PhD. Last week, I submitted the final abstract of my thesis for my supervisor's approval. That same morning, he died. He was 57 years old.

My PhD is in the field of military history, and my supervisor, the late Professor Jeffrey Grey, was probably the finest military historian in Australia.

When I first approached Jeff at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) he clearly thought I was an idiot. He only changed his mind when my novel, *Spirit House*, was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. With this, I seemed to transform in his eyes from a complete idiot to a near-complete-idiot-with-one-single-redeeming-talent. This, I suspect, put me ahead of 90 per cent of humanity.

When I turned up to enrol, I couldn't find his office, even though I'd been there for an interview (like I said, I'm an idiot). I was discovered wandering vacantly around the campus by an academic from another faculty. He asked if I were a member of staff or a postgraduate student. When I told him Jeff was my supervisor, the stranger lightly touched my arm and said, "You don't have to spend much time with your supervisor, you know. I hardly ever saw mine. You'll probably be all right."

He pointed me towards the faculty building, where eventually I found Jeff sitting in a room with books packed on every shelf of every wall, and even more books piled high on his desk and table like towers of Jenga bricks, or a scale model of the New York City skyline. (When I texted a mate to tell him Jeff had died, he asked, "Did his books fall on him?")

I told Jeff about my encounter with the other academic and he laughed, then gently probed me for identifying details so he could find him and, presumably, kill him.

Once Jeff had accepted me, he was very kind. He was the perfect supervisor for someone like me, who just wanted to be taught stuff by someone who knew stuff. He guided me towards the right answers with a subtlety I only fully came to appreciate when I began work on my final draft.

I wrote every sentence with Jeff in mind, and now he'll never read it.

I always attend funerals and memorials, even though I hate them. Twenty-seven years ago, I was out of the country when my grandad died, so I never properly mourned him and he didn't truly seem dead to me. For years, my grandad came back to me at night in my dreams, telling me he was still alive and asking me to come out for a drink.

For years, I would wake up in the morning and my heart would break once more.

I don't want Jeff in my nightmares, urging me to finish my thesis when I'm 80 years old, so I went to his memorial service at RMC Duntroon. I saw his father march sadly through the chapel, wearing his life story in ribbons across his chest. Major-General Ron Grey had fought in Borneo, Korea and Vietnam yet still somehow outlived his son. It must be the most terrible thing in the world to see your children die before you. But in the military, more than anywhere, they know that.

It was a good memorial. At the front of the chapel was a table of books Jeff had written. They weren't actually for sale, but the display made me think that, when I pass on, it might be a good opportunity to flog off some of the remaindered copies of *Spirit House* that fill my attic with evidence of my commercial failure.

I wouldn't be able to sign them, though, obviously.

All grown-up columns have to have a moral, and the moral of this one is: if you have a teacher you value, for God's sake don't hold them close, hug them, or tell them how much they mean to you.

Because Jeff would've really, really hated that.