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## The Potter: The Great Wall and other stories

by [Georgia Keighery](#)

Arts Hub

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I remember a time, I was 8 years old and my third class teacher explained that we were about to begin a unit on China. I precociously raised my hand, proud as punch to have some personal knowledge about the subject to add, and sure that the rest of the class would be riveted. “My Dad helped to build the Great Wall of China!” I explained to my teacher and the rest of the class.

The following look of disbelief that rose on my teacher’s face I found to be odd and a little annoying. I took a patient breath and explained, “The Emperor asked him to help because he’s a good potter and knows a lot about firing techniques and could help out ...”

My dismay at my teacher's lack of excitement, indeed her timid disbelief was rising so I went on, to help the obviously inane woman overcome her awed silence. "The Emperor was so impressed with Dad's glaze work on the bricks that he gave Dad a beautiful silk dress with gold thread through it, and Dad bought it home, and took the thread out and bought our house!"

My teacher paused and smiled then asked, "Are you sure about that? You might want to ask your Dad again" ... "Of course I'm sure, how else would we have bought our house? He's an artist. He showed me the dress." To answer her persistently disbelieving face I added, "He had the gold thread replaced with yellow once he'd bought the house – his friend is a weaver!"

To paint a backdrop for you, it was 1987 and my house swelled with the debate of the time: Art versus Craft. My father, a ceramicist and university teacher/lecturer in the field, has been president of both Crafts Council of Australia and the National Association of the Visual Arts ... or, as he likes to put it, he "makes pots". My mother, a passionate arts administrator, a pioneer in her field, helped to define the nature of modern arts management and CCD practices.

And myself; the first time I got drunk it was at a gallery opening sneaking wines in the corner unbeknownst to my parents. I'm sure many kids have similar stories, but my knowledge of my father's work, his professional world, his medium were all part of my detailed understanding of the world before I could spell properly. Creative expression was highly valued, both in terms of refining my ability to engage with other people's work, and in terms of the development and layering of the expression of my own.

When faced with the question of what life was like growing up with an artist father I have to say I found myself shuffling my feet a little as I pondered the answer. Was my childhood colourful? Most definitely. Eccentric? Undoubtedly. Playful? Absolutely. But when I trace what my father taught me I hit a challenge – his teachings don't seem to protrude as they might if I had memories of Dad demonstrating how to change the oil in a car, or deal with my tax return, or showing me how to build a dog house.

The things he showed me were more subtly instructive than that, and like a true teacher he revealed these things to me without telling me, or demonstrating in a “how to” fashion, but through a series of questions. He revealed ways of seeing, methods of investigation, the intrigue of observation, and he did this by asking questions like, what do you think this means? Why do you think that? What do you see happening here? And while his cryptic questions in answer to my questions annoyed me as a teenager, they echo through me now, and seem to gather ever more ripples of meaning the older I get.

I remember returning from a party a little tipsy and very annoyed over some teen crush gone horribly wrong around the age of 17. I minced into the lounge room, hand on hip, and wryly queried my father “Oh god Dad, when do boys just grow up?”. He looked up from his book and gave me a dry smile as he said, “12 darling. What answer are you expecting here? Boys are grown up at 12!”

I remember scoffing at my father and thinking I should have known he’d defend his own sex. It took me another 5 years to understand that in fact he wasn’t, he was telling me that men finish maturing at 12 ... However, he also knew I wouldn’t understand what he was saying until I grew up.

When I confronted my Dad as an eight year old about the validity of his Great Wall story I remember I asked him whether or not it was true, and he laughed and said “It’s a great story darling, and I really enjoyed telling it”. In my childhood the value of a good story was never underestimated. I’ve grown up with an implicit understanding of the fact that there is usually more truth to be found in a good story than there is in the facts.

I was given the tools to appreciate how every view of the world is different, made up from the layers of memory and experience that have created a person’s life. Looking at the world like a work of art: why has this artist used this medium? What does a ceramic sculpture, or an oil painting, or an installation do to you as a viewer that another medium might not? What treatment has been used on the surface and why has the artist chosen that finish?

I do remember becoming a little bogged down by all the ways I could explore an artist’s work, and I asked dad how I knew I was reading it right, how I knew that

what I was seeing and feeling was what the artist wanted? ... “What if I’m thinking it’s all about one thing or saying one thing and I’ve just read it wrong?” I remember we were at the art gallery of NSW at the opening of a painter my father knew.

“Why would it matter if you don’t see the same thing as the artist?” he asked seriously. I took the same patient, but slightly exasperated breath I had taken with my third class teacher and explained, “Because otherwise I’ll have read it wrong” ... To which he replied, “Will you?”

### Georgia Keighery

Theatre actor and writer, Georgia co-founded Prompt Theatre in 1998. Her first full-length play “The Flats” won a commendation at the 2003 Philip Parsons Award and she was a writer for the B’Sharp 24 Hour Play Project in the same year. Her most recent play ‘FiRE’ was part of Darlinghurst Theatre’s In The Raw festival in November last year, and she hopes to grow up to be a valid human being one day.