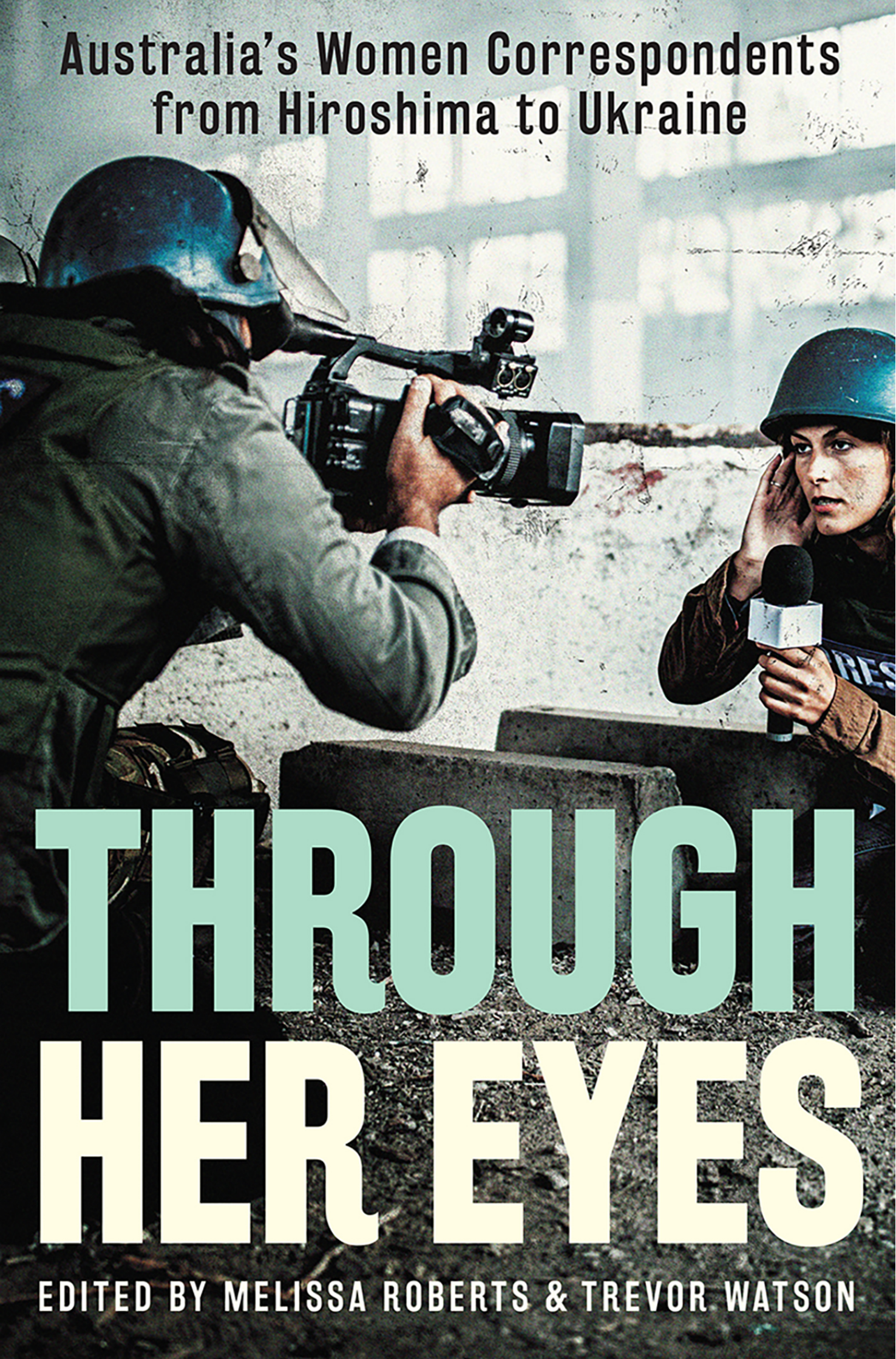


Australia's Women Correspondents  
from Hiroshima to Ukraine



**THROUGH  
HER EYES**

EDITED BY MELISSA ROBERTS & TREVOR WATSON

# THROUGH HER EYES

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*Hardie Grant*

BOOKS

# Women in the hot zone

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By Melissa Roberts and Trevor Watson

**I**N THE HIGHLY unlikely event of Russia's President Vladimir Putin ever facing a war crimes tribunal, charged over the many atrocities committed by his forces in Ukraine, he must be questioned about dead journalists.

Fourteen were killed in the first six weeks of the war. Were they merely collateral damage or were they deliberately targeted, murdered to prevent the outside world learning of Putin's brutal behaviour; the missile attacks on children, hospital patients and refugees; the rape and the execution of bound civilians? Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky believes the reporters were executed to guarantee their silence. He maintains that 'Putin is frightened of journalists because they tell the truth'.

At this moment, Australian correspondents are telling the truth as they personally witness it. Many of those who inform far away audiences of the war in Ukraine, the rise of China, a divided America, Europe's immigration crisis and trauma in Africa are women. They are filing now from Jakarta, New Delhi, Tokyo, London, Jerusalem, Port Moresby, Washington, Kyiv and many places in between. They report the facts, and they interpret those facts in a compelling and meaningful way for us and for our decision makers. These correspondents, male or female, often risk their own safety for the story.

The gender of a correspondent shouldn't matter. But the reality is that until very recently, gender determined all in journalism, particularly opportunity. While it is now common to see women closely questioning world leaders, interviewing disaster victims or lacing up combat boots, that hasn't long been the case and change hasn't come easily. Women have needed single-minded determination, courage and,

in some cases, the wherewithal to fund the launch of an international career if they were to break through the gender-based barriers that held them back.

To paraphrase British rabbi Lionel Blue, journalists are just like everyone else, only more so, and newsrooms have traditionally been just like many other male-dominated workplaces, only more so. They have been blokey places of clattering typewriters, cigarette smoke, booze at the desk and large amounts of adrenaline. The conversation has been of political upheaval, personal tragedy, football scores and sexual exploits. The nature of the work attracted big egos, larger than life characters, adventurers and voyeurs. The few women who managed to join the news industry were exposed to highly sexualised humour, and occasionally to verbal abuse laced with threats of gender-specific punishment from editors quick to fury over some minor misdemeanour.

Until relatively recently, women were largely confined to the 'women's pages'. Decked out in hats and gloves, they covered fashion and society events or wrote advice columns, which earned them the sneered nickname 'sob sisters'. When they had the chance to cover real news, they were confined to the 'women's angle' – nurses tending to the wounded, the home front, refugees. Their male colleagues covered the action, the tectonic shifts of history, the deeds of great men.

When working alongside their male counterparts, women lived with a miasma of sexism. In 1981, the term 'microphone stands with tits' entered the patois of the Parliamentary Press Gallery in Canberra. It was coined as a reference to a group of young women, including a co-editor of this book, who covered national politics for Australia's commercial radio networks. The insult, published in *The Bulletin* news magazine, came, the women believed, from a supposed friend and a highly respected member of the Gallery. The women did not challenge him on it – that's not what one did; they were the ones embarrassed by his betrayal, not him. He has since died, and the chance to discuss it has passed. 'They were really sexist days, but that was a reflection of the society,' one news presenter told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) online service. It was a time when women on the Senate side of the Press Gallery had to cross the building to the only women's toilets, when all women were obliged to wear skirts, and young women had to quietly accept being ogled.

FOR A WOMAN to graduate from the domestic newsroom to a much sought-after overseas assignment or a posting to a foreign bureau before the mid-1980s was a herculean task. You will distract soldiers, aspiring women correspondents were told, a conflict zone is no place for a woman. They were refused assignments because there would be no women's toilets, or separate sleeping quarters. They were told that an assignment was too dangerous, that women were too emotional and, by their very nature, unreliable. Lorraine Stumm, an accredited war correspondent in World War II, was obliged by fellow journalists to leave a military briefing on the grounds that women could not keep secrets. Radio and television outlets including Australia's national broadcaster, the ABC, argued that women didn't carry the authority of male reporters, that listeners didn't want to hear their voices or be told what to think by a woman. Diane Willman was told that the ABC didn't send women to foreign postings because they might get married and have children. Willman paid her own way to Beirut and became a household name on the strength of her coverage of the civil war that gripped Lebanon in the 1970s. The ABC's Helene Chung was refused a traineeship, despite being among the best candidates, because the training would be wasted on 'a girl'. Chung eventually became the ABC's first woman foreign correspondent when she was posted to China in 1983.

Women like Willman and Chung, as well as Kate Webb, UPI bureau chief during the Vietnam War, and groundbreaking *Sydney Morning Herald* China correspondent Margaret Jones, were pathfinders and trailblazers. According to her obituary in the *Herald*, Jones was responsible for much of 'the correction of the gender imbalance in Australian journalism during the second half of the last century'. (Jones and Webb both paid their own way overseas.) Correspondents who today cross borders with rebels, embed on Special Forces ops or interview the inhabitants of the Afghan women's tent owe them a debt.

There are many more female journalists who must be acknowledged for their contribution to Australia's understanding of our international environment. They include outstanding reporters like *The Wall Street Journal's* Geraldine Brooks, the ABC's Sally Sara and Zoe Daniel, *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Louise Williams and *The Australian's* Jacquelin Magnay. Other exceptional Australian women covered China, and contributed to our book *The Beijing Bureau*.

GENDER MAY NO longer be a barrier to international assignments and postings, but it continues to play a role in the lives – and work – of female reporters. Like male correspondents, they work around the clock and face the risk of death, injury and kidnap. Female reporters also risk sexual violence. They are often reluctant to bring danger to an editor's attention, as it might impact on their career, but correspondents move in areas where the rules don't apply. Western women may be viewed as fair game, online threats can spill into real life and Australian journalists with a diverse heritage can pay a personal price when they push back against cultural norms. Women correspondents with children also talk of their battle with guilt as they struggle to balance the priorities of family versus work. Some worry about time spent away from home – or the office – and are uneasy about moving the kids from post to post. Others fear the effects of too much adrenaline or a dose of tear gas on an unborn child.

Women correspondents are the equal of their male counterparts. They are among the bravest and most insightful journalists we have at a time when the hot zone is more dangerous than it has ever been. Once, journalists were ignored by combatants as bystanders or valued as neutral observers who would tell their stories to the world. Now, they are targets.

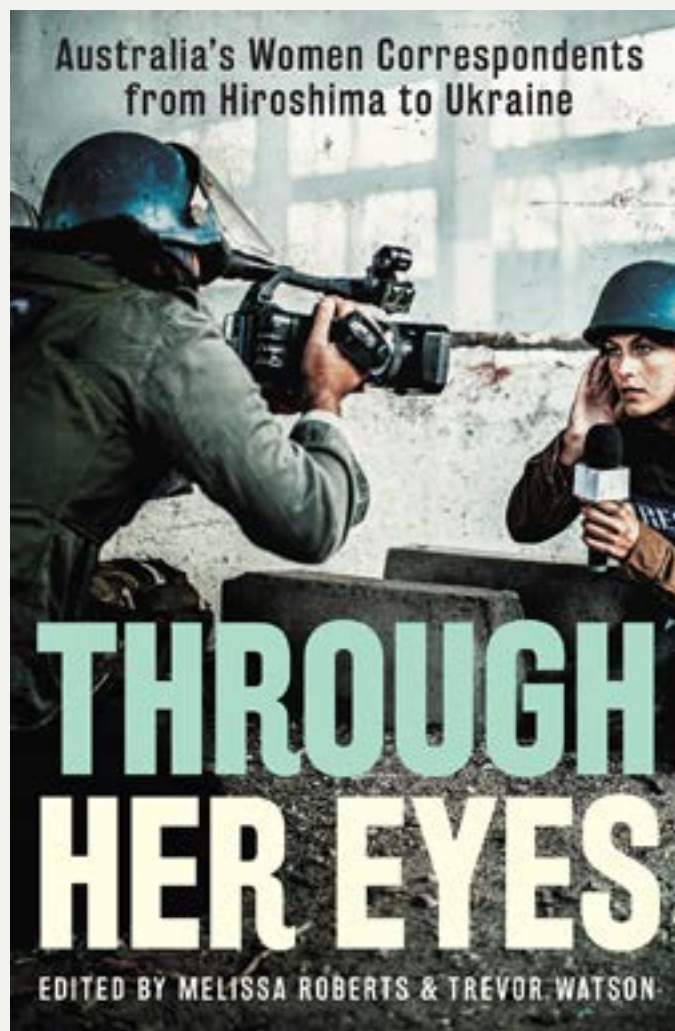
The carpeted halls of the management floor, and many newsrooms, remain the domain of the white, middle class and mostly male. But as we increasingly see the world through the eyes of women, something has changed. Those people-focused stories that once earned women derision are the stories that now tell us about the human truths behind the first draft of history. All journalists, male and female, now report the world very differently as they cover the chaos overwhelming the lives of ordinary people caught up in the winds of change. Being empathetic is a job requirement rather than a cause for ridicule. We now hear more about the people huddled in basements in Kyiv than the specifications of the munitions they are sheltering from, or the name of the general who ordered the bombardment. Soft stories are now the big stories.

Women, as Mao Zedong famously pointed out, without ever fully acting on his idea, hold up half the sky. Women correspondents are vital to covering the news. Without hearing about women, without hearing from them, we hear only half the story.

# *Through Her Eyes*

**Edited by Trevor Watson and Melissa Roberts**

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