

DIANA RUZZENE GROLLO

AUTHOR

You've just published a semi-autobiographical book called *Growing Through the Brick Floor*. What motivated you to write it?

I thought it was important to record the history of the previous generation who came here otherwise once they go it's all gone. I wrote it for my children for them to understand my past, their past — but it's a very common story.

Is that part of the book's appeal — that it's a universal story?

Yes, I have been approached by several people who have read the book and they've said to me "if you change the name, that's my story".

What was it like as a seven-year-old Italian suddenly cast into a different country?

Well I cried every night for a long time. It was difficult. It was alien. But, perhaps more than that, we picked up our parents' insecurities.

What about going to school — did you speak any English when you arrived, or have many friends?



I didn't understand anything that was being said. I missed out on the basics. We were very much alone. We tended to mix with each other.

You said you struggled with religion. Was being Catholic very different in Australia?

Yes. They were *Irish* Catholics here. The climax, I remember, was when I was preparing for my confirmation and we all had to make a solemn promise that we wouldn't touch alcohol until we were 18. And I felt very guilty

because I knew I was going to go home and have my bit of wine to celebrate. So it was very hard living with this diversity.

Both you and your husband, property tycoon Rino, grew up in the same parish?

Yes, we knew each other from childhood. My parents and his parents were friends, and Rino was friends with my brothers.

You say the book is not a rags-to-riches story. But it really is in part, isn't it?

It's a story of struggle and a story of hope, a story of aiming for goals and achieving them. When you say rags to riches you tend to concentrate on where I am now — associated with the Grollos. I like to think it's something more than that.

You seem to have lumped the 1980s and 1990s into the last chapter. Is that because you didn't want to emphasise the good times with the Grollos so much? You wanted to emphasise the struggle?

(Laughs) Who said I'm having a good time? It's bloody hard! No that's not it. The Grollos, we like our privacy. You know there are 15 Mrs Grollos and 14 Mr Grollos and the media portray it like this is *the* Grollo family, but it's not. There are many Grollo families, and I am a Ruzzene who just happened to marry a Grollo. But there's been a lot of hard work and there's been a lot of pain. Quite probably, if I was to look from 1980 to now there's probably more psychological and mental pain than the previous starving and hunger and poverty. It's hard because I have particular values and I have been lumbered into something that I'm not too sure I want to be part of.

So having Grollo as part of your surname is actually a drawback at times?

Yes, it is, because you tend to lose your own identity. And this is what I'm fighting for, for my own children to develop their own identity. Their uncle (Bruno) has his story. Their father has his story. They need to develop their own. **It's obviously difficult. Even your book was caught up in the family controversy when the media couldn't cover the launch because of Bruno Grollo's trial.**

I accept that. I make some allowances. Rino's doing this thing, I really need to work in with him, so there's a sense of compromise and I understand that. Sometimes you do get caught up in the machinery.

Diana Ruzzene Grollo was talking to GENEVIEVE LALLY. Picture: HEATH MISSEN.