

Living in her grandfather's shadow

Angela Findlay's German grandfather was a decorated Wehrmacht general who fought for his country in World War II. The impact on her own life has been immense, she tells Katie Jarvis – a struggle brilliantly documented in her book, *In My Grandfather's Shadow*

Angela Findlay's home occupies a hinterland between the living and the dead. Her lodge house sits on the edge of a graveyard; on the outskirts of a Cotswold town. Six acres of cemetery gaze down towards the Severn. In summer, yellow kidney vetch and fried-egg ox-eye daisies push up alongside rare lichens. At dusk of a July eve, otherworldly lights of glow-worms shimmer around gravestones.

Angela Findlay has never shied away from the subject of death. Once, in her early 20s, she met a friend in Australia; instead of chat about clothes or boyfriends, they shared how they envisaged their funerals. 'I've always felt the dead don't disappear,' she says, as we sit in her kitchen. (Once it housed the sacristy where priests would prepare for interments.) 'They still exist. Whether it's in our memories; or as a spirit; or in places or objects...' And in their descendants, too.

ANGELA FINDLAY is a delightful companion. There's a lightness about her; a zest to live life to the full. Recently, she holidayed in Germany, cycling the Berlin Wall. 'And I thought, 'My gosh! This is a vibrant city. This is a triumph!' I could feel a form of joy bubbling up in me.' That joy marks a watershed; a turning-point. In previous years, the city's glories had been obscured for her by the horrors of its past. Yet it's a turning-point; one that has taken her 15 years of historical and scientific research, psychological



Photo: Angela Findlay

LEFT:
Angela Findlay

ABOVE:
Karl von Graffen
at an artillery
demonstration

enquiry and soul-searching to reach. It has involved – with her family's blessing – digging into the roots of her German ancestry: breaking through the silence that surrounded her grandfather's role as a German general in World War II.

Indeed, the book she has written – *In My Grandfather's Shadow* – discusses subjects all-too-often brushed under carpets.

'Difficult or uncomfortable subjects that often get avoided,' she says. 'Crime, trauma, shame, guilt, redemption, forgiveness.'

It's a book that looks both at perpetrators and victims of barbaric acts. And it places the forces that lead to barbarity firmly under the spotlight. Only in understanding the 'thin ice' between civilisation and inhumanity do we have a chance



of stopping future horrors in their tracks, she says. Most groundbreaking of all, it explores whether the wrong-doing and guilt of previous generations can be handed on to descendants they never even knew.

THROUGHOUT much of her Hampshire-based childhood, Angela Findlay was a rebel. Expelled from boarding school (for wearing forbidden court shoes; for swearing at a teacher), she fared no better at sixth-form college – eventually banned from setting foot on the premises except to sit exams.

But a disregard for authority was coupled with debilitating depression that descended on her at the age of 16. Only in art – a field that was to become her profession – did the young Angela find solace. As she began mapping out a career, she found herself drawn to prisons, working on therapeutic art sessions with the most ‘difficult’ of convicted criminals. At a mural-painting project in Long Bay Gaol – one of Australia’s most notorious

– her work-team consisted of two Brazilian coke-smugglers, a murderer and a bank robber: ‘I felt instantly at ease’.

It’s an intriguing phrase. For, as her book weaves its way through an intricate, overgrown path between past and present, it becomes clear the ‘ease’ she felt was more than a lack of fear in the presence of violent men.

No. The ‘ease’ came from a counterintuitive feeling of kinship with them. Unassuaged, unsolicited feelings of shame and guilt that she’d had all her life found a strange home within these punishing walls.

But why? Angela’s conflicted sense of nationality had never helped. As a child growing up in 1960s and 1970s England, her half-German ancestry still carried a terrible sense of shame. At a dinner party held by her parents one evening, a guest noticed a photograph that Angela’s mother, Jutta, had on display of General Karl von Graffen, Jutta’s father. ‘A bit tactless... to have a Nazi sitting on her writing desk!’ the guest exclaimed.



photo: Angela Findlay

TOP:
Karl, the athlete, 1930s

ABOVE:
Karl von Graffen with his wife and two eldest children at Zwinger, Dresden, for the official ceremonial presentation of Karl’s Knight’s Cross, 1943

Karl von Graffen was a professional soldier and skilled artilleryman, who led his troops in the massive invasion of Russia during World War II, both enduring and instigating hardship and horror. Decorated for bravery – a recipient of Germany's prestigious Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross – he had proven devoted to his country.

Angela never knew him – he died a week after she was born. But could this man, nevertheless, have handed on unresolved shame and guilt about wartime acts to his granddaughter? Whatever scientists, psychologists, ordinary people might think, to Angela this was the one possibility that made her innate feelings of badness make sense: '...like a relay racer passing on a baton, he handed me something. It would take me more than four decades to discover what. And that, just as we might inherit physical or character traits, we can inherit the unresolved emotions, traumas or crimes of our forebears, too...'

THESE ARE BIG ISSUES; huge questions that our conversation lingers over. In researching her grandfather – and in trying to learn about herself at the same time – Angela traced his wartime footsteps across Italy and Russia. Studying faded photographs – such as the evocative image of her grandfather (at La Stranga in the Italian Dolomites) surrendering to Americans, cigarette in hand –



Photo: Angela Findlay

she stood on the very spot where he'd once stood. She pored over from psychological theory and PTSD, to a study of how genes can be impacted by trauma. From established fact to 'woo-woo' thinking (as Angela self-satirisingly terms it), she explored the nature of barbarity; the possibility of inherited trauma.

She also tried to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable: how kindness and empathy can find a place within a person who could also carry out acts of unthinkable violence.

'I'm talking about terrible acts by armies, such as the killing of civilians; the kind of acts my grandfather carried out as a German general in World War II,' she says. 'Yet this same man – a nature-loving, family-loving athlete – wrote letters home,

TOP:
One of Angela Findlay's mud paintings
Silent Night

expressing his own horror when fleeing Russians emotionlessly watched as family members died of exhaustion.'

These are uncomfortable questions that Angela felt well-placed to ask. 'And that was partly because my half-German, half-English heritage meant I was the "goodie" and the "baddie"; the winner and the loser. So anything that is said about either side is both me and neither me. I felt in this unique position to find all those more-than-50 shades of grey in between. A black and white narrative of good/bad, winner/loser is unconstructive and unproductive. It leaves us with: "OK, we've now judged that; we can put it in a box". It's got nothing to do with us.'

So what should we do instead?

'We could explore the context of a person's actions in more depth: try to understand their situation; their motivation. What they were trying to achieve by doing what they were doing. And then ask ourselves: "What would I have done?" I quote Socrates: "No one who either knows or believes that there is another course of action better than the one he is following will ever continue on his present course when he might choose the better".'

She recalls something an Australian prisoner once told her. 'He said to me: "Angela, I've never met any person in prison who committed their crime out of evil intent". So if not 'evil intent', then what? That's the big question I have been trying to understand.♦

IN MY GRANDFATHER'S SHADOW is utterly compelling; elegantly written. A book that occupies a hinterland between the living and the dead. It's also extremely brave.

For years before her book's publication, Angela was giving talks; and some of the reaction – particularly in early days – was baldly antagonistic: 'Bloody Germans. I hate Germans.'

But the beauty of the book is how absolutely clearly it shows the depth and breadth of her research; the care and sensitivity she has brought to bear on the most difficult of subjects. And the reaction this time has been healing. 'I get

emails from people – friends or total strangers – who say how touched and moved they are. People who say they're asking questions they never asked before. I'm loving the impact I'm hearing that it's having on people.'

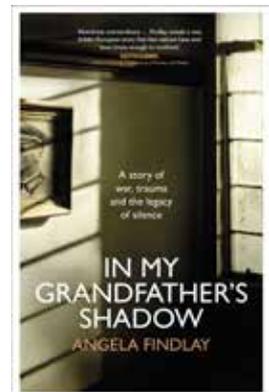
In one sense, it's an end to a lifetime of questioning. It's also another beginning. 'I will continue to learn; I'm still very open to conversation, debate, discussion about pretty much everything in the book. I'd like my mind to be changed on some of the things; but, at the same time, I've put down in all honesty what I've felt and thought about for pretty

much my whole life.' So, let's ask a very personal question. What would Angela do if her grandfather were to walk into the room now?

Angela Findlay's eyes fill with tears. 'Ah, so interesting. We have somehow put each other through so much. I think, first of all, there would be a formality between us. But I also think there would be mutual respect. Maybe even a form of gratitude...?'

In My Grandfather's Shadow, by Angela Findlay, is published in hardback by Bantam Press, £20.

For more on Angela's work, visit angelafindlaytalks.com



Stroud Book Festival is from November 2-6. Angela will be speaking at Stroud Book Festival on Thursday, November 3: stroudbookfestival.org.uk