

KOOMBANA DAYS



In 1912 the SS *Koombana*, a passenger and cargo steamship that plied the West Australian coast, tragically disappeared after a run of uncannily bad luck. We chat to WA author **ANNIE BOYD** about her new book on this ill-fated vessel.

■ Your chapter 'The Ill-Fated Complement' mentions every person known to have been aboard when *Koombana* was lost. How did you manage to track everyone down?

In about 2003, with the help of the descendants of those lost, I began assembling dossiers on the passengers and crew. It did not occur to me that that I might end up with information on just about everyone aboard. In some cases the information was rich and colourful; in others, I had only a faint outline of a life cut short. Only later did I realise that the great disparities in what I knew about various people should not stop me telling the story. The essay became a personal tour of the ship, with an everyday mix of close acquaintances and passing encounters.

■ Your narrative includes several court cases. Do you have a particular interest in courtroom drama?

Yes, I enjoy courtroom drama as a kind of theatre, but the convergence of cases in **Koombana Days** is largely coincidental. First, the accident-prone ship was the subject of three marine inquiries: when she ran aground on her first Nor'-West run, when she struck a reef and was holed on her second Nor'-West run, and in 1912 after she disappeared. There are also three coronial inquests closely tied to the broader story, and two remarkable murder trials, neither of which has ever been studied in any detail.

■ You have described *Koombana* as 'accident-prone'. Do you consider the ship unlucky or 'ill-fated'?

I'm not superstitious, but *Koombana's* run of outs was quite extraordinary, so much so that it seemed imperative to include an incident chronology as an appendix. In the space of three years, *Koombana* got into serious trouble more than a dozen times: she ran aground, caught fire, broke her moorings, struck a reef, was trapped by the tide, and found herself at the centre of an industrial dispute that saw her tied up at Fremantle for three weeks. I should add that most of the ship's woes were related to her size and draft. Put simply, she was too big for the ports she was built to serve.

■ Has there been any progress in the search for the wreck of *Koombana*?

Yes. The *Koombana* Search Group is working with Dutch company, Fugro Survey, to continue the search on an opportunistic basis, whenever a suitably equipped vessel has a gap in its commercial program. A large area of seabed has been scanned in the last three years, but without success so far. We remain optimistic. **gr**

Koombana Days by Annie Boyd is published by Fremantle Press, rrp \$39.99.



▲ *Koombana* (left) and *Charon* (right) at Broome, State Library of Western Australia.

