

## ***A Country Practice: the 10 best moments in Australia's beloved soap***

*Over 1,000 episodes and 12 years, this soap opera taught a lot to the nine million Australians who tuned in each week to see what was happening in Wandin Valley*



*The cast of the A Country Practice.*

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When you think of educational television, you think of Sesame Street and Playschool, maybe Degrassi Junior High if you had boomer parents and no access to What's Happening to Me books.

Let me introduce you to A Country Practice, which you might have watched, but didn't realise was brainwashing you with its kind-hearted, antiwar, pro-woman, lefty agenda. Over 1,088 episodes from 1981 to 1993, it sucked you into learning about all sorts of health and social problems in our society, through the eyes of characters you could be in love with no matter what age you were. You're a 39-year-old stay-at-home mum? No worries, here's Dr Terence Elliott. You're a 85-year-old retired brickie? Enjoy dreaming of Esme Watson making you scones.

Government departments and not-for-profit organisations pitched stories to the writing team, who also spent a lot of their time mining newspapers for relevant stories to tell the nine million Australians who tuned in weekly. In doing so, the show leaves us with an extraordinary historic record of Australia in the eighties, but it also achieved some substantial things, like teach Australians about HIV/Aids without a bowling ball in sight.

A Country Practice made you into who you are, and here's how:

### 10. Frank Gilroy, dream copper



*'Suspicious of no one, kind to everyone' ... Frank Gilroy.*

No lefty utopia is complete without a policeman who believes in the right to protest, community musical theatre and growing prize-winning roses. Frank Gilroy (Brian Wenzel) runs the local cop shop with a gentle hand and an open mind. His drink of choice at the Club is orange juice and he's only got eyes for Shirley, his rabble-rousing wife who is a smoking, meditating hippy when they meet. We rarely see him throw the book at anyone, and he's always first to step in when any bride's father is unable to walk her down the aisle. He could mansplain for Australia, but no ACP character is perfect. Suspicious of no one, kind to everyone, Frank Gilroy 101 should be taught at the police academy.

### 9. The death of Donna



*Donna gets in her car for the last time.*

These episodes have everything: Mozart, fatigue, young love, chemical danger, a cake that looks suspiciously like the Australian Women's Weekly piano cake! It's Mozart's birthday, and nurse Donna (Caroline Johansson) is keen to throw a surprise party for it as she has the massive warms for vet Ben (Nicholas Bufalo), who has the massive warms for Mozart. At the same time, we have an overworked truckie carrying dangerous chemicals, and a drunk driver who are – of course – going to collide at a

crossroads and break every heart in Wandin Valley. It's spectacular storytelling and basically a two-hour advertisement for all the things that can go wrong on the roads.

## **8. Gary Foley teaches millions of Australians about Indigenous land rights**

*Season nine, 'On the Threshold' parts one and two, 'Last of the Summer Wine' part two, 'Birthright' parts one and two*



*Steve Murray (Gary Foley) in A Country Practice.*

Over five episodes in season nine, Indigenous activist Gary Foley played pastor Steve Murray, who comes to town to look after his sick niece. He convinces Dr Alex Fraser Elliott to leave Wandin Valley and work in his community, which is desperately in need of medical support.

Foley wrote on Facebook in 2020 that, when ACP creator Jim Davern invited him on the show, “I told him I would on the conditions that I would select the sort of character I would play and that I would expect control over the dialogue I would speak. He agreed.”

“An unexpected and ironic fringe benefit” of being Murray was that Foley “found that I had reached a far bigger mainstream audience in Australia with my message about land rights and justice than I ever had in all of my previous political work. And the positive audience response was such that it was almost two years before I could get on public transport in Melbourne without being pestered for an autograph or a political chat.”

## 7. When Esme Watson became a human being



*'If Esme Watson is a spinster, sign us all up.'*

Actor Joyce Jacobs was an extra in the first season of ACP, but she was so delightful and funny that writers began asking if they could give her a line or two. Esme Watson was born. In her first few seasons, she's the ancient cliché of nosy "spinsterhood" (meddling, opinionated, prejudiced); by the end, if Esme Watson is a spinster, sign us all up. She stands up against the women's church group who've ousted a woman whose brother has Aids. She cares for a drug addict who most have turned their back on. And she cooks just about every wedding lunch there is – and there were a load of weddings. Her kindness, care and community spirit know no bounds. Name your child Esme without ever worrying the name will be cancelled because of something she did. Esme Watson, it turns out, is a massive goodie.

## 6. And the bride rode in on a ute

*Season three, 'From This Day Forward' parts one and two*



*Vicki Dean arrives on her wedding day.*

There were a lot of women in the writing and production team of *A Country Practice* and it shows, constantly. Weddings are never without the bride somehow announcing herself as much more than a bride, and this is most evident in ACP's first big wedding, of vet Vicky Dean to doctor Simon Bowen. The morning of the wedding, Vicky (Penny Cook) is called to help a horse that's been gored by a bull; she ends up having to dress for her wedding in a shed, and gets there just in time on the back of a ute. It's an iconic image, and one that surely inspired *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* a few years later.

## 5. Gay people are people too!

*Season two, 'Mates' parts one and two*



*Doug and Keith, the gay couple in A Country Practice.*

In 1982, ACP was in its second season when it presented a storyline that would have been a first for many conservative Australians who by then were watching the show in droves. It introduced us to the Abbot brothers, the local shopkeepers. The Abbots were much loved in Wandin Valley – coaching tennis and greeting everyone who

came into their shop with a smile and a question about their lives. But when Doug gets sick and needs a transplant, it doesn't take long until the community realises he and Keith aren't brothers, but partners. The episodes explore the lack of rights the couple have over each other's medical decisions and the prejudice in the small town. It ends tragically for the couple, but not before the show has asked us some tough questions about how Australia treats gay people in the early 1980s.

#### 4. Addiction strikes anywhere



*Sophie (Katrina Sedgwick) speaks with Esme.*

To grow up in the eighties and nineties was to be shit-scared of heroin. Personally, I can attest to not even trying marijuana until well into university because of Go Ask Alice and these episodes of A Country Practice. The daughter of beloved Dr Terence Elliott (Shane Porteous), Sophie (played by now ACMI director, Katrina Sedgwick) is a beautiful and intelligent foreign correspondent, who became a heroin addict after experimenting with drugs overseas. No matter how hard she tries, nothing is more powerful than heroin. Over four episodes, we see her desperate father try to save her, only to be seconds late as she overdoses in a barn. Sure, it was anti-drug propaganda, but the beautiful performances made it nothing short of devastating.

#### 3. Molly's farewell



*Molly (Anne Tenney), suffering from leukemia, is comforted by husband Brendan (Shane Whittington).*

OK, OK, OK, so we all know that beautiful scene when Molly succumbs to the cancer that's been ravaging her for a 13-episode arc: her husband Brendan's flying a kite with their daughter Chloe and, in some gorgeous filmmaking, the camera shuts on them and we know she's dead. But I put it to you that a similarly beautiful moment happens in the episode before. Molly is locked away in a hospital room, as her

leukemia makes her so at risk of infection she can't even have her little girl in for cuddles. Everyone is grief-stricken by this, until a wily nurse realises they can put her in the maternity ward, which has a big glass window. While Molly ails, the whole of Wandin Valley come and wave at her. It's beyond beautiful.

## 2. The farshun



*An example of Molly's home-made clothes in A Country Practice.*

Every week, the costume people at ACP were given a wad of cash to buy costumes for characters. And at the end of the shooting block, the clothes would be put outside the ACP office and sold at a discount for any Channel 7 accountant who fancied a new teal Perri Cutten blazer. The Powerhouse Museum retrospective we could have had now would put any Romance Was Born exhibition to shame, if Channel 7 had only archived these amazing clothes. The home-made flamboyance of Molly's outfits, the doctor-chic of Alex Fraser's, the glamour of Shirley Gilroy – any of these women could have stood beside Princess Di.

## 1. The actual prime minister comes to town

In 1986, real-life children and teens were terrified about nuclear war, so in turn the teens of Wandin Valley High were too. They were angry about what adults were doing to them and how they seemed to have no regard for their future. (Sound familiar?) Their teacher encourages them to protest and raise awareness and so ... they put on a rock concert, inviting the prime minister. And, because the PM of the time was Bob Hawke, ACP approached him and he came to set, recording his "speech" in one take. If you can watch these episodes without getting goosebumps, you need to see your doctor.

- *Melanie Tait is a host on A Country Podcast. All of A Country Practice can be streamed on 7 Plus.*