

## THE EDWARD STREET BABY FARM

STELLA BUDRIKIS

### ABOUT THE BOOK

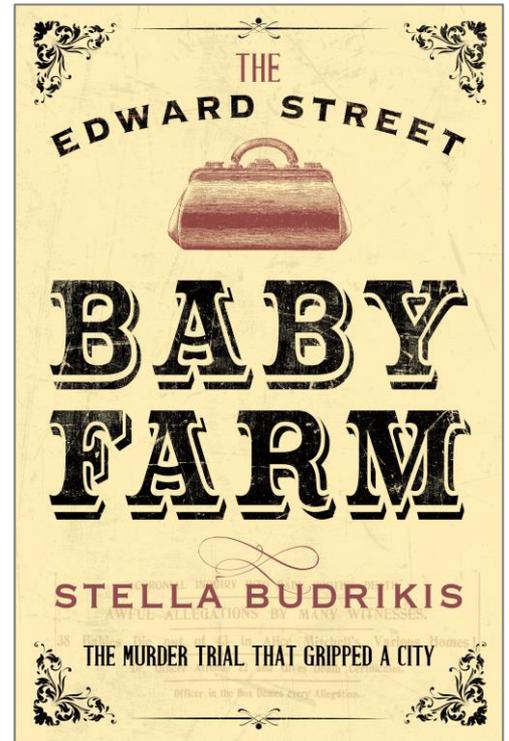
In 1907, Alice Mitchell was arrested for the murder of five-month-old Ethel Booth. During the inquest and subsequent trial, the general public was horrified to learn that at least thirty-seven infants had died in Mitchell's care in the previous six years. It became clear that she had been running a 'baby farm', making a profit out of caring for the children of single mothers and other 'unfortunate women'. Through a close examination of court documents and newspaper reports, Stella Budrikis retraces this infamous 'baby farm' tragedy and the trial that gripped the nation and led to legislative changes to protect children's welfare.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stella Budrikis was born in England but has lived in Western Australia for most of her life. She has worked as a general practitioner, pastoral carer, addictions clinic doctor and freelance writer. Stella is married with two grown-up daughters and enjoys researching family and social history.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How much did you know about this story before reading the book?
2. What did you learn from the book about Perth in the early 1900s that most surprised you?
3. What did you think of the writing style and the way the book was structured?
4. Do you think the author's own medical background has contributed to how she approached this story?
5. According to the author, a book needs 'one or more interesting characters at the centre of the story that both the author and the readers can relate to.' Which character in the book is the most vivid for you?
6. From the extracts available in this book, how do you think that the nature of newspaper reporting compares to reporting today?
7. Do you think that Perth itself has changed much in the past 100 or so years?
8. Alice Mitchell has been described elsewhere as 'Australia's worst serial killer' and 'a psychopathic murderer'. What evidence does the author present to create a more nuanced picture of Alice?
9. 'Incompetence is more common than greed or malice as a cause of disaster.' Do you think that incompetence was the main factor in the Alice Mitchell case?
10. In the preface the author writes, 'Here was a society struggling to lay the blame for its own failings upon [Alice Mitchell] to appease its conscience.' Do you agree? In what ways did society fail the infants who died in Alice Mitchell's care?
11. Is it possible to see Alice as the victim of a system too?
12. How did the nature of this society's moral position in relation to single mothers contribute to the tragedy?
13. Why do you think Dr Officer bounced back so quickly after the trial, while Harriet Lenihan lost her job? Do you think her dismissal was reasonable or unfair?
14. What impact do you think this trial may have had on the lives of Alice Mitchell, Harriet Lenihan and Ned Officer?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### ***What drew you to tell the story of the Edward Street baby farm in the first place?***

Initially, I was just curious about what happened to the babies and why it was that I'd never heard anything about the Alice Mitchell trial before. But after delving into the backgrounds of the three main people involved (Alice Mitchell, Dr Officer and Harriet Lenihan) I really began to feel that this was a book I wanted to write. An accused murderer with a respectable pioneering background, a doctor famous for his football-playing skills and a health inspector who studied at the Conservatoire de Paris in music – their stories were all so unexpected and unusual. What I discovered about Perth and Western Australian society at the time also surprised and intrigued me, and I wanted to share what I was learning.

### ***Did you have an opinion about the guilt (or otherwise) of Alice Mitchell before you began?***

It became clear early on in my research that Alice Mitchell had, at the very least, failed to prevent the deaths of the babies in her care. But I suspected that describing her as a 'psychopathic serial killer' was probably unwarranted. Once I discovered the shockingly high infant mortality rate at the time (one in ten babies died before the age of one) I felt even less certain that she had deliberately killed them. But the more I dug into her own story and the more I learned about the circumstance in which she took in the babies, the more complicated her motivation and her actions became.

### ***What do you think we can gain or learn by looking back at historical events like this one?***

Our society today is very different than it was in 1907, economically, technologically and socially. We have many more laws to protect the vulnerable. But human nature hasn't changed. By looking at events and situations from the past, and examining what motivated the people involved to act as they did, we can gain an understanding of similar situations in the present.

### ***What's next for Stella Budrikis?***

I've almost completed the first (very rough) draft of a book about Fremantle in the 1890s, when the harbour was being built. I'm trying to interweave the stories of C. Y. O'Connor and Dr Henry Barnett, the superintendent of the Fremantle lunatic asylum, to show how they were connected during those years.

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