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## The “Countess from Kirribilli” who sparked an international literary mystery

Long before *Bridgerton* was a TV hit an Australian-born author hid her identity to write about taboo topics as the world’s press worked to unmask her.



**Jen Kelly** In Black & White columnist

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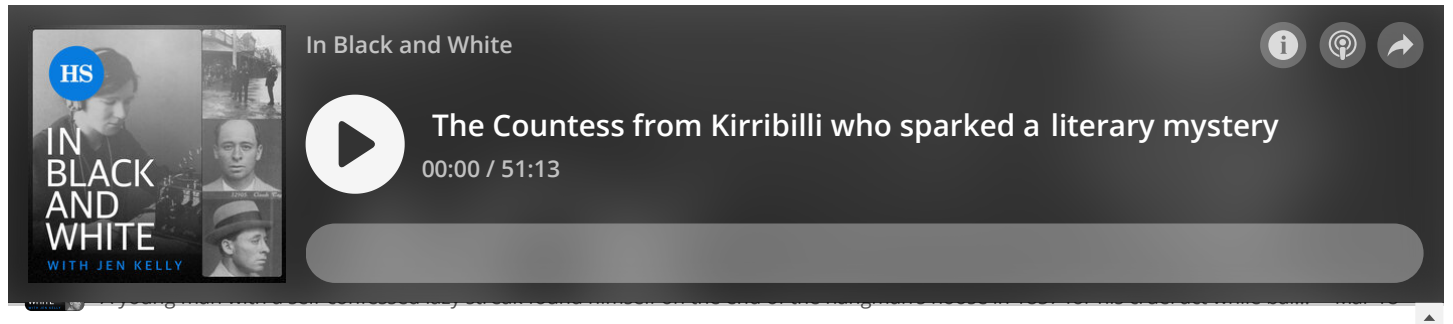
After three years of marriage, Elizabeth von Arnim was a mother of three.

WHEN an Australian-born girl married a German count after her court debut before Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace, many thought she was set for life.

But life as an aristocrat was not enough for the fiercely independent Mary Beauchamp, and she turned to writing.

The young mother became an international best-selling author of semi-autobiographical books, tackling taboo topics from women's sexuality and adultery to childbirth to Nazism.

Mary, later known as Elizabeth von Arnim, is the subject of the latest episode of the In Black and White podcast on Australia's forgotten characters:



Her story is told in a new book called *The Countess from Kirribilli*, by arts journalist and author Joyce Morgan.



Countess von Arnim was born Mary Beauchamp in Kirribilli in Sydney.



As a Prussian countess, Elizabeth von Arnim's life was privileged but ruled by rigid formality.

As the wife of a German aristocrat, Countess von Arnim could not put her own name on her books, and instead chose a simple single-name pseudonym, Elizabeth.

“It just wasn’t considered decent for a married aristocratic woman to be sullyng her hands earning money from writing commercial books,” Ms Morgan says.

“So her first book was published anonymously.”



Count and Countess von Arnim



Elizabeth von Arnim wrote about taboo topics including the agony of childbirth.

The 1898 book, called *Elizabeth and her German Garden*, was an instant bestseller, earning critical reviews for its wit and whimsy.

It described her life in her husband’s remote rural estate in Pomerania, and fictionalised the Count as “The Man of Wrath”, gently poking fun at him.

Within 18 months, it was reprinted 21 times.





Elizabeth's remote home Nassenheide in Pomerania was where she began her writing career while raising her children.

Her anonymity sparked a worldwide mystery as journalists from New York to London to Melbourne attempted to unmask the true identity of "Elizabeth".

"Soon there was lots of speculation like, 'Who is Elizabeth?', 'Who is this mysterious writer that's published this best-selling book?' because it became a bestseller in England, in America, in Australia," Ms Morgan says.

"It set off a huge international literary mystery to discover who was behind the book."



Elizabeth dubbed her first husband the 'Man of Wrath' in her first book. She caught him in an unguarded moment at Nassenheide around 1905.

Some publications speculated the author must really be a man.

Countess von Armin was dismayed when a small literary journal in London spilt the beans, exposing her as the author.

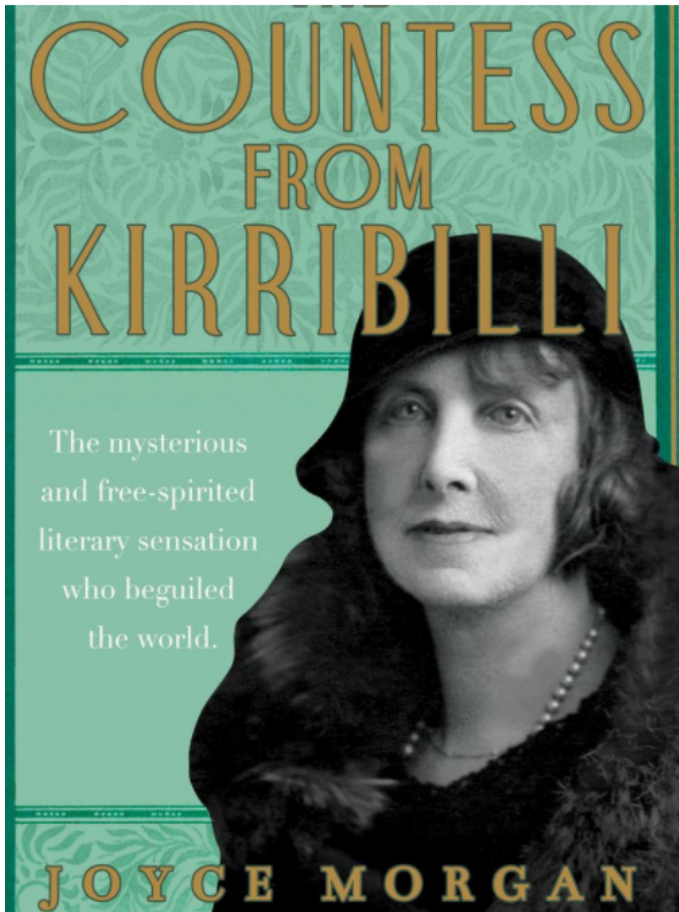


After four daughters, in 1902 Elizabeth finally produced the son her husband longed for.

The article used her family's childhood pet name for her, May, suggesting the traitor was someone in her inner circle.

In distant Melbourne, there were further revelations when literary journal *The Book Lover* reported the anonymous writer was "an Australian native" who was "married to a German count".





Book cover for The Countess from Kirribilli.



Arts journalist and author Joyce Morgan.

But other press largely ignored the revelations, and readers were thrown off the scent when The New York Times claimed it had confirmed rumours sweeping British high society – that the author was another wealthy aristocrat, Princess Henry of Pless.

The Chicago Daily Tribune, The Washington Post, The Irish Times, The Australian Star and the Daily Mail were among mainstream newspapers to weigh in with competing theories.

It was years before her identity was widely known.



Bette Davis portrayed the ageing beauty Fanny Skeffington in the 1944 movie of Elizabeth's final novel, Mr Skeffington.

Even after she was unmasked, the mother of five attempted to maintain her anonymity, and not one of her more than 20 books was published under her real name.

**Listen to the interview about Elizabeth von Arnim with Joyce Morgan in the In Black and White podcast on [iTunes](#), [Spotify](#) or [web](#).**

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**Jen Kelly**

In Black and White columnist

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Jen Kelly has been the Herald Sun's daily In Black and White columnist since 2015, sharing our readers' quirky and amusing stories from the past and present. She also writes and hosts a weekly history podcast called In Black and White on Victoria's forgotten characters, featuring interviews with a range of knowledgeable guests. Jen has previously covered general news, features, health, city affairs, state politics, travel, parenting and books over more than 20 years at the Herald Sun.

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