

The lure of new life with a fortune-teller

A scandalous family secret of seduction and intrigue is finally uncovered by a great-granddaughter, **Carolyn Webb** writes.



It was the scandal of 1905. Rosetta, wife of respectable Melbourne businessman Louis Raphael, had done a runner.

She had not just left her husband and five-year-old daughter. She was having an affair with a fortune-teller.

It was beyond the pale that the paramour was a half-Chinese former tinsmith called Zeno the Magnificent.

The seduction had taken place in Zeno's studio above a shop on Swanston Street.

No one begrudged Mr Raphael divorcing his wife on the ground of adultery. In his eyes, she was as good as dead.

For Rosetta's great-granddaughter, Sydney writer Alexandra Joel, her notorious forebear was an enigma. Why did she discard her comfortable marriage for a clairvoyant? What happened to the lov-

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Alexandra Joel, author

ers? And how could Rosetta leave her little girl?

To seek the answers, Joel has written a book, *Rosetta: A Scandalous True Story*.

She says the desperately unhappy Rosetta saw Zeno - real name William Norman - as the key to a new world of love and adventure.

"Zeno said, 'you can be anything you want to be'," Joel says. "Clearly what he held out to her was a far more fabulous life."

The lovers fled Melbourne for Sydney, where they performed hypnotism, clairvoyance and illusion in the Palace of Illusions in a long-gone fun park called Wonderland City.

It sprawled across Tamarama foreshore: an air ship hovered over the rides and marquees, there was an elephant called Alice (Alice in Wonderland), and there were reenactments of Ned Kelly's last stand.

In 1910, Rosetta and Zeno sailed for London. Zeno opened a clinic in New Bond Street, Mayfair, as a Japanese professor of medicine.



Clockwise from top: Wonderland City fun park at Tamarama Beach; Rosetta and her lover Zeno in 1905; author Alexandra Joel.

Photos: Carolyn Webb, Dallas Kilponen

Rosetta, his assistant, claimed to be American.

For five years, they were feted by wealthy clients to whom they prescribed dubious pharmaceuticals, and who they hypnotised, massaged and counselled.

Followers included physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, aristocrats Beatrice Marconi, wife of the inventor Guglielmo, and royalty such as Princess Charlotte, sister of Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany.

The couple visited socialite Baroness Ernesta Stern and the Empress Eugenie, widow of Napoleon III, at the palatial home Villa Torre Clementina on the French Riviera.

In 1915, their European clients scattered due to the war and, perhaps fearful their true identities would be exposed, Rosetta and Zeno returned to Australia. Rosetta became a wealthy Sydney property owner whose tenants included



THE MAGIC AND MYSTERY OF WONDERLAND CITY

Opened: December 1, 1906.

Closed: 1911.

Entrance price: Sixpence for adults; threepence for children. All rides extra.

Attendance: Estimated at 2000 people every summer weekend

Attractions: These included an artificial lake, the first open-air ice-skating rink in Australia, a roller-skating rink that doubled as a boxing ring, a double-decker merry-go-round, the Airem Scarem - an airship that tracked on a cable from

cliff to cliff and was supported on the cliffs at both ends by massive wooden structures - Alice the elephant, a seal pond and aquarium, and the Kings Theatre music hall, which seated 1000 people for variety shows.

brothel madam Tilly Devine. Zeno became an artist and practised the rituals of freemasonry, in an echo of his showman past.

When Joel was growing up, discussing Rosetta with her nana Frances (known as Billie), Rosetta's daughter, was a no-go zone.

"All my grandmother said was, 'my mother didn't want me, she ran away and left me'. I think I knew not to go there during her lifetime. It was such a shocking, dreadful thing."

Joel says writing the book did change her view. She discovered that Rosetta was 18 when she first married, and Louis was 32.

Rosetta believed she was assaulted on her wedding night, when Frances was conceived, and it soured her marriage, and possibly affected her feelings about her child.

Joel realised also that it may have been Louis who insisted that Rosetta never see Frances again.

It was Joel's father who said: "This is an extraordinary story.

This should be a book and you should write it."

Rosetta was "a missing piece in the story of my family" and Joel felt she had to "be a conjuror and call her forth". As for Zeno, Joel now marvels "at what Rosetta did and the extraordinary life she created".

"I guess I've come to an understanding, if not complete resolution as to the motivation of what she did," Joel says. "But there will always be a part of Rosetta that will remain a mystery for me."