

## NAISH, JOHN (JACK) (1923 - 1963), author and playwright

**Name:** John Naish  
**Date of birth:** 1923  
**Date of death:** 1963  
**Spouse:** Rosemary Ruth Naish (née West)  
**Child:** Guy West  
**Child:** Lee Naish  
**Parent:** William John Frederick Naish  
**Parent:** Sarah Ann Naish (née Griffiths)  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** author and playwright  
**Area of activity:** Literature and Writing; Performing Arts  
**Author:** Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui

John Naish was born on 20 April 1923 in Port Talbot, Glamorganshire, the third of four children of William John Frederick Naish, a carpenter, and his wife Sarah Ann (née Griffiths), a teacher. His siblings were older brothers William and Edward, and younger sister Lilian (Lily).

He was educated at Eastern Primary School and Port Talbot Secondary School. He was keen on sport throughout his life, and represented his school at both rugby and cricket. However, the predominant interests in his life were literature and the dramatic arts, in which his talents were nurtured at school by Philip Henry Burton, a teacher who inspired some of his pupils to pursue a career in the dramatic arts - most notably Richard Burton - and others to study literature at university level as John's sister Lily did at Aberystwyth University.

Most of Naish's writings feature a recognizable alter-ego. These characters always seem to be trying to escape a situation or a person. In his first book, *The Clean Breast*, styled as an autobiography, he portrayed industrial Port Talbot as a Dantean landscape, one he clearly sought to escape. It is to the 'gloomy valleys and tortured heritage' of Wales that one critic attributed the fateful air of John's last novel *That Men Should Fear*. Meanwhile, his ability to replicate local idiom was attributed to his Welshman's musical ear. Naish took pride in his Welsh heritage, and allusion to the landscape and culture of Wales are scattered throughout his fictional works.

On leaving school Naish engaged as an articled student with a chartered accountant. In May 1942 he enlisted in the Welsh Guards Armoured Training Wing. He was sent to Norway and later to Germany with the British Army of the Rhine occupation forces. On discharge from active duty in March 1947, he worked in Swansea as assistant to the secretary of a company selling cars and agricultural machinery. He then moved to London in October 1948 where he worked as a clerk for a company managing theatres.

He then applied for an assisted passage to Australia. On 4 May 1950 he boarded the *Otranto* bound for Queensland. Once there, he began working in labour intensive jobs while writing. Primarily he was employed in the brutal job of sugar cane cutting in tropical north Queensland, an experience which inspired his first novel *The Cruel Field* and related plays.

In late February 1956, having fulfilled the residential obligations of his assisted passage, he set sail for home. He broke the journey with a stopover in Fiji where he was employed as a shipping clerk with the Burns Philp Company. There, in Suva, the first of his plays was performed and subsequently published in Australia. Further plays dated 1957 suggest he was experimenting with both social realism (predominantly sugar country plays and novels) and non-realistic modes simultaneously.

He met Australian-born doctor Rosemary Ruth West in December 1956. On completion of her medical studies she had travelled to Fiji to work with the Methodist Mission. John was driven by an insistent creative urge and Rosemary fell immediately into the whirl of his intense focus on writing plays, play readings, directing, producing and acting. Rosemary also soon came to appreciate that John suffered bouts of depression.

Engaged and expecting their first child they decided to return to Australia in 1958 to Rosemary's hometown of Adelaide to be married. They then travelled north to Queensland where John resumed cane cutting, all the time writing. There their first child Guy was born.

Rosemary was pregnant with their second child when, in 1959, they travelled back to Port Talbot where baby Lee was born. During this time Naish secured a publishing contract with Hutchinson of London for *The Clean Breast*. Arriving back in Australia in April he returned to cane cutting, secured further publishing contracts with Hutchinson and so continued writing at a furious pace. Three books and a play would be published in three years. In the same period there were two Little Theatre productions of his plays, he won a north Queensland playwright competition and a play and novel both received special commendations in national literary competitions. Aside from the published works he is known to have written 14 other plays and one short story.

The family settled in the isolated community of Cooktown in north Queensland where Rosemary was medical superintendent of the hospital and John wrote full-time. Rosemary managed John's escalating depression as best she could, while also actively facilitating his creativity both physically and emotionally. She was his handmaiden, his muse and his equal as he channelled his existential questionings into coherent fictional reimaginations. John himself admitted that without her encouragement, belief in and nurturing of his talent, he would not have achieved what he did. Naish's plays and novels survive as the only comprehensive and authentic fictional accounts of labour and society in the northern sugar regions during the 1950s and 1960s.

John Naish died on 19 July 1963 from a self-administered lethal dose of barbiturates. He was buried in Cairns Martyn Street Cemetery.

### Author

**Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui**

### Sources

Archival material: Queensland State Archives, Brisbane; National Archives of Australia Canberra; West Glamorgan Archive; Army Personnel Centre, Support Division, Historical Disclosures, Glasgow

John Naish, letters to William and Sarah Naish

Rosemary West (Naish), diaries 1955-1960

Family information by email correspondence

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Original playscripts are held by Fryer Library, University of Queensland and Special Collections, James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland  
A record of performances of his plays is in the online [Australian Live Performance Database](#) and a catalogue of his published works and criticisms of his work is in the online [Austlit](#) database

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