At the age of fifteen Madeleine saw herself as a painter and pianist, but Ms Medway peered down at Madeleine during her entrance interview in 1957 and announced: ‘You know dear, I think you might write.’

Madeleine would write. But not for some time. The Women in Black, a sparkling gem that belied the difficulties that had dogged her own life, was published when Madeleine St John was in her fifties. Her third novel, The Essence of the Thing, was shortlisted for the 1997 Booker Prize.

Helen T rinca has captured the troubled life of Madeleine St John in this moving account of a remarkable writer. After the death of her mother when Madeleine was just twelve, she struggled to find her place in the world. Estranging herself from her family, and from Australia, she lived for a time in the US before moving to London where Robert Hughes, Germaine Greer, Bruce Beresford, Barry Humphries and Clive James were making their mark. In 1993, when The Women in Black was published, it became clear what a marvellous writer Madeleine St John was and she continued to write until her death in 2006.

Extract available, see overleaf

‘A pocket masterpiece. A jewel.’

HILARY MANTEL on Madeleine St John’s The Women in Black

Helen Trinca has co-written two previous books—Waterfront: The Battle that Changed Australia and Better than Sex: How a Whole Generation Got Hooked on Work. She has held senior reporting and editing roles in Australian journalism, including a stint as the Australian's London correspondent, and is currently Managing Editor of the Australian. twitter.com/helentrinca
Sydney University and the Octopus Girls

On campus, 1959 was proving to be a very good year. Those who hovered around Honi Soit and SUDS in that period read like a list of Australia’s culture shapers: Clive James, Les Murray and his rival in poetry Geoffrey Lehmann, Richard Walsh, John Gaden, Mungo MacCallum, Robert Hughes, Bruce Beresford.

The freshers watched French movies downtown in George Street and competed to recommend the latest novel. In this febrile atmosphere, Madeleine was intellectually able but she was overlooked by the leading men on campus. Clive James later blamed himself for not seeing her potential. ‘I had absolutely no idea she was such a writing talent…she was a writer, a real one. But at that stage she hadn’t written anything, so perhaps we can forgive ourselves for not spotting that there was a genius in our midst.’ Bruce Beresford was a close friend in later years but, in 1959, he didn’t pay her much attention.

But it was on stage that Madeleine shone, surprising everyone by being cast in a lead role in the University Revue in May. The show was called Dead Centre, with skits by Clive James, among others, but it was Madeleine’s appearance as the lead in ‘The True Story of Lolita Montez’ a piece written by Chester and John (later Catherine) Cummings, which became part of Octopus lore.

Madeleine was not a natural actor, although she had inherited the St John gift of mimicry. But she saw herself as something of a femme fatale, even if buried in a duffel jacket and oversized jumpers. The role of Lola Montez appealed to those fantasies, and she adored the vintage dress she wore on stage. Some thought the skit was a touch cruel and that it held the unglamorous Madeleine up to ridicule, but it’s likely she understood the satire.

Late in her life, Madeleine was bitter about her university experience. She said she had arrived on campus thinking it was an institution ‘devoted to the truth’ but had been badly let down. She ignored the happy times on stage or gathered around the tables in Manning House. Friends’ recollections are more complex and varied than this. Her novels do not touch on campus life and in 2004 when she recorded several hours of tape about these early years she did not mention her time at Sydney. She forgot the joy of that first, brilliant year when she threw off her duffel coat and took to the boards as Lola Montez.