

# LINDY CHAMBERLAIN-CREIGHTON in conversation

When I first heard about the Eternity Series of public conversations, organised by the Museum's Audience Development and Public Programs unit and presented in the latter half of 2007, I was very excited. Having been involved with the Eternity Gallery during my time working in the Registration section, I was keen to continue my association with this unique space. Once I'd cut my teeth on the Jenny Kee talk, held in August, I was ready to tackle the much anticipated Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton conversation, held on 14 October 2007.

Alice Lynn Chamberlain-Creighton, known to most Australians simply as 'Lindy', is arguably one of the best well-known women in Australia. The

*Sydney Morning Herald* listed her as one of the 100 Most Influential Australians since Federation, and the story of her case divided families and communities throughout the 1980s. Even today, internet forums feature people hotly arguing about her guilt or innocence, and according to the official Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton website, 30 per cent of Australians still believe her to be guilty. It is amazing that almost twenty years after the Chamberlains were exonerated there remain people intractably convinced of her guilt, and no amount of evidence to the contrary will sway them. Perhaps this is even the opinion that some readers hold.

Lindy's story in Eternity is displayed under the emotion *Mystery*, and

focuses on the mystery of the public's fascination with Azaria Chamberlain's disappearance, and with Lindy herself. From the time the nine-and-a-half week-old baby disappeared, it was quickly apparent that 'Azaria sells', and this continues to be true today. A testament to this is that the two sessions in the Visions Theatre booked out after only a single advertisement in the local paper. What is it about this case that continues to hold such fascination?

Lindy's opinion and comment continues to be sought on events that appear out of the ordinary or bizarre, such as the Joanne Lees and Peter Falconio case, or the disappearance of Madeleine McCann from Portugal in 2007. Azaria's disappearance also continues to make headlines. In 2004 a Victorian man, Frank Cole, claimed to have shot a dingo on the night Azaria disappeared, and to have found a baby between its jaws. Conversely, in 2005 a woman named Erin Horsburgh approached the media claiming that she was Azaria Chamberlain. Both these claims were quickly dismissed, but each time something like this occurs, the case is rehashed, Lindy's name brought back into the media spotlight, and opinions on her guilt or innocence are once more traded back and forth, though these days it's more likely to be on obscure internet forums rather than as front-page headlines.

So how has this affected the woman herself? According to audience research on the day, this was the reason many people came to see Lindy and curator Sophie Jensen in conversation, to hear in Lindy's own words how she has dealt with the experiences of the past 26 years.

In some circles to say someone is normal may be an insult, however it was a comment overheard many times following the conversations. 'She's so *normal!*' people exclaimed, approvingly, but with surprise.

In short, Lindy *is* normal. But that is something she has maintained throughout the ordeal, that they were just a normal, ordinary family who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. 'That whole part of my life still seems unreal; it seems to have



Azaria Chamberlain's black and red dress and red bootees in the National Historical Collection.  
Photo: Dragi Markovic



Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton in conversation with curator Sophie Jensen, 14 October 2007. Photo: Lannon Harley

so little to do with *me* as an ordinary person. To me it is something that has happened to two ordinary people, albeit it shouldn't have.<sup>1</sup>

Lindy comes across as being strong, down-to-earth, and generous. She spent the break between sessions talking to people and signing their books, their Museum maps, anything they asked her to sign. She chose to forego lunch in favour of chatting with members of the public, showing them photographs of her now grown-up children. It is a tribute to Lindy's character that a woman who has endured so much speculation at the hands of the public remains so open.

Lindy also possesses a wonderful sense of humour. Seated on the stage of the Visions Theatre she cheekily recounts to the audience how she was in the middle of burning the piles of correspondence she had received throughout the 80s, when she was approached by staff from the National Library of Australia. 'I could see the startled looks on their faces when I said, "I am just burning stuff", and they pleaded, 'please don't!''

What was once destined for the pyre now represents a highly significant collection. 'The Library tells me that the 1980s is documented more in Australian history than any other decade because of everyone's letters to me. You told me what you paid for

things, what your kids thought, which schools they were going to, what you thought of all the politicians, were the sales were, what you thought of housing prices. One lady used to tell me what she cooked for her husband every meal and I would get it itemised in two or three letters a week!'

As Sophie pointed out, the Chamberlain case is a prism through which the decade of the '80s can be explored and interpreted. Connections have been made between aspects of the case and a number of issues, including gay rights and women's liberation, which Lindy admits to finding surprising.

It is as though Australia feels a sense of ownership of the Chamberlain story, and of Lindy herself. The public is very much present in the collections of both the National Library and the National Museum. The way Australians responded to Lindy, to the trial, and to the inquest, is now part of history. It was an interesting feature of the conversations that the audience continued this trend of *responding* to Lindy. During the Q & A people invariably began by recounting their own experiences or feelings about the case, whether as parents of children the same age that Azaria was, or as people who had initially thought Lindy guilty but had since changed their mind. One person said that they were 'ashamed to

have been Australian at that period of time'. Many people wept as they spoke. The audience's own sharing was an unexpected but successful feature of the day.

However, despite Lindy's invitation to the audience to tell her why they continue to find the case, and her, so fascinating, this is one mystery that was not solved on the day. Perhaps it's a generational thing (Sophie Jensen has recounted how her sixteen-year-old step-daughter once asked her blankly, 'Who's Lindy Chamberlain?'), and in time the hullabaloo will die down even further. Perhaps a new generation of Australians will not recognise the name, but the ramifications for Australian law – and Australian history – will continue for years to come.

**The audio file and transcript of Lindy's conversation is available on the Museum's website –**  
<http://www.nma.gov.au/audio>

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<sup>1</sup> Chamberlain-Creighton, L., *Through My Eyes*, (2004) East Street Publications, South Australia, p584