



# In[ter]view: Royce Kurmelovs

Verse Mag's Regular Graduate Interview



Interview conducted by Jesse Neill | Photos supplied by Royce Kurmelovs

UniSA graduate, Royce Kurmelovs, is a freelance journalist and author living in Adelaide. He has published two books and written for publications around the globe such as The ABC, The BBC, CNN, VICE, Al Jazeera English, and The Guardian to name a few. Speaking with Jesse Neill, Royce discusses his writing journey thus far, the fascinating projects he's been working on, and the challenges of working in a changing industry.







How would you describe yourself and your line of work?

I'm a journalist, which means I have no taste for honest labour and few other marketable skills. I'm also a freelancer, which means I fly no flag and don't operate out of any particular newsroom.

Generally speaking, I'm a jack of all trades. I will write what gets me paid, though I am really a profile writer. Profile writing is to sketch out a person's life and my preferred subjects are everyday people. Most journalism, in most places, concerns itself with the lives of the rich and the powerful. These are the people who run organisations or entire countries, those who enjoy money or have some kind of celebrity. I don't really find them all that interesting and I figure there are already a lot of reporters out there covering those people, so I'd rather do something different. Not that everyone is always willing to pay money for it.

When you were studying at university is this where you expected to end up?

Yes and no. Journalism was always the goal. How it would all end up was a mystery. I'm the son

of an earthmover, so I had no one to really show me how it was done or how to exist in the professional world. When you come from a working class background, it's pretty clear you don't always belong. You're a little too quick to speak your mind. You don't dress right. You swear too much. In a lot of ways it was insane for me to embark upon this career trajectory and in a lot of ways it still is. That hasn't stopped me from trying, and frankly, even I'm surprised how far I've carried it. I'm pretty sure if my family had it their way, I'd be a lawyer.

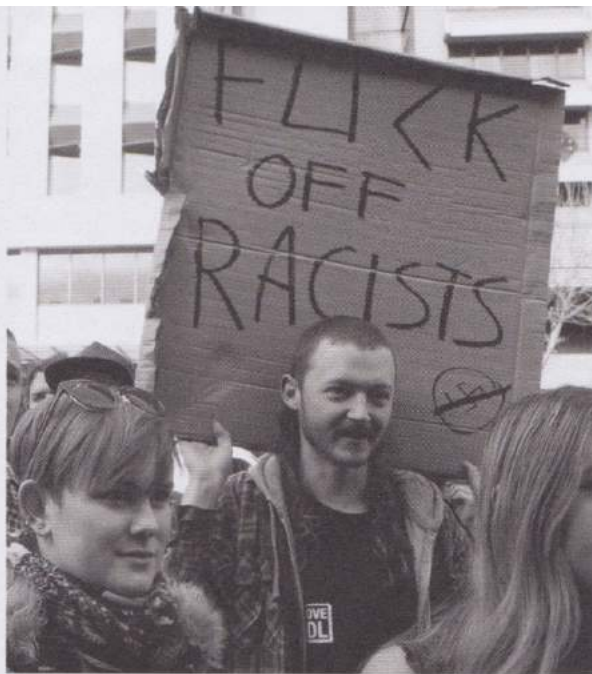
Whether I'm still doing it in six months, who knows? Come find me again then and see if I'm still in business.

From what I've read you're quite the multi-talented creative. A freelance journalist and photographer, as well as a performance poet and published author. Which one of these do you enjoy the most and why?

Credit to you and your research skills. Poetry was something I did while I was at university because I didn't have time to write anything longform. It's something I'm glad I experimented with. It taught me public speaking, which is







something I still struggle with, and it taught me to be a better writer. As someone whose journalistic work mostly involves producing features, profiles and longform journalism, it taught me a solid grasp of metaphor, symbolism and word play.

As for the rest of it, for a start, I'm not a "creative". That's a little too highfalutin for my blood. My work is journalism and I see it like a trade. Everything I do is another tool in the box to help me earn a living. As a rule, freelancers don't earn a lot of money and few resources are allocated to giving you a dedicated photographer to work with on a job. When it happens, it's something of a novelty. This means you have to learn how to shoot for yourself. Getting a decent set of shots from a protest or some other event may be enough to get you an additional sale. Books are another aspect of this. I may be wrong (and I am always open to being wrong as that's how you learn stuff), but I believe one of the last places where proper journalism can be done is through books. The publishing industry affords you some start-up resources to perform a deep-dive into a subject and the blank canvas with which to explore it differently. That said, Australia doesn't necessarily have a good culture of narrative journalism, or even the half-news, half-magazine style that belonged to the alt-weeklies in the US. This is where the origins of my style lie, and is probably what makes my voice different from a lot of others. I am not the first to do journalism this way, though. Far from it. In Australia, Margot Kingston is

probably the best I've read who has gone down this path and often been deeply misunderstood. She is someone who understands that journalism is both more than the dry, inverted pyramid of a newspaper and also a weapon. She is an essential read for anyone curious.

**As a freelance journalist you've written for some well-established media organisations such as Al Jazeera, Vice, BBC, and The Guardian to name a few. How did you begin freelancing?**

In the final year or two of university I lived alone and survived off the Centrelink student allowance. As a lot of people probably know, that's tough. Freelancing was first a way to bring in some extra money and then a way to break into an industry in which I had zero connections. I couldn't afford to "intern" my way into the biz by working for free, so I had to find some other way. The first serious turn towards freelancing came during my final set of exams when, in the middle of that period, I spent my grocery money to fly to Sydney to sit an interview for a job with The Guardian. I did not get it, and I didn't deserve to. I was totally out of my depth. But the then-editor of Guardian Australia, Lee Glendinning asked if I wanted to freelance for them. Of course I said yes and then went about making every mistake possible.

For me to go down this path was extremely risky. Not everyone should. And if you do, you should make sure you have an exit strategy or have some other way to fund yourself.



**What is the writing process like for you?**

An editor of mine once said most people hate writing, they just enjoying having written. I enjoy writing. I like waking up, sitting down at my keyboard and doing the work. It brings purpose and I enjoy waking up knowing exactly what I have to do tomorrow, which is why I am always nervous when I come to the end of a project and I have to start thinking about what's next.

**You published your first book *The Death of Holden: The End of an Australian Dream in 2016*. Can you tell me what inspired you to write this book and the journey it took to reach publication?**

I needed something to write about. There was an investigative journalism mentorship program going and I needed a pitch to get through the door. At the time, the end of the car industry was a local event with a national significance and something I, frankly, knew nothing about. The factory defined life for everyone out there. It was something fixed and certain in the landscape that most Australians never really thought about and took for granted. I had a personal connection to the place in that my grandfather had worked there when he migrated to this country, and after asking around I pretty quickly worked out that everyone where I lived had a story like that and even a lot of the people who lived elsewhere. I grew up in the shadow of the Holden factory, in a neighbourhood where the only significant person to come up there during my lifetime was David Hicks, the guy who the US locked up in Guantanamo Bay. Then I learned about deindustrialisation

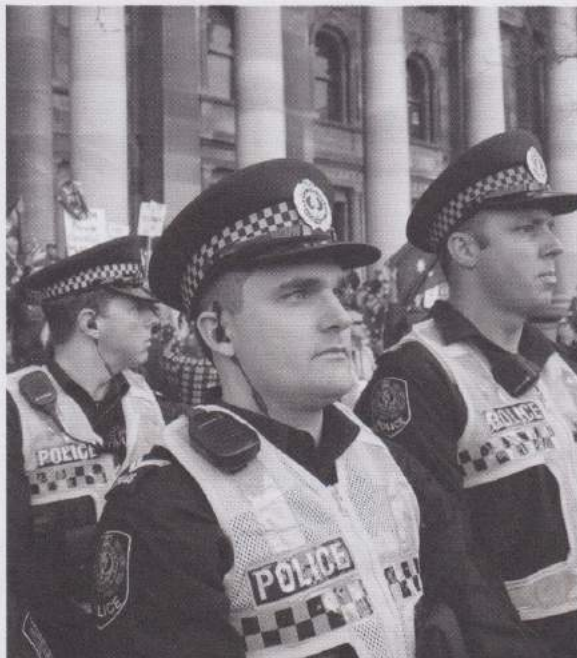
and what happens when you close industrial operations of that size without much of a plan. It made so much of my life up until that point suddenly make sense and it helped me understand the world around me far more clearly. So that became the book.

***“Really, my whole job is to talk to interesting people about interesting things”***

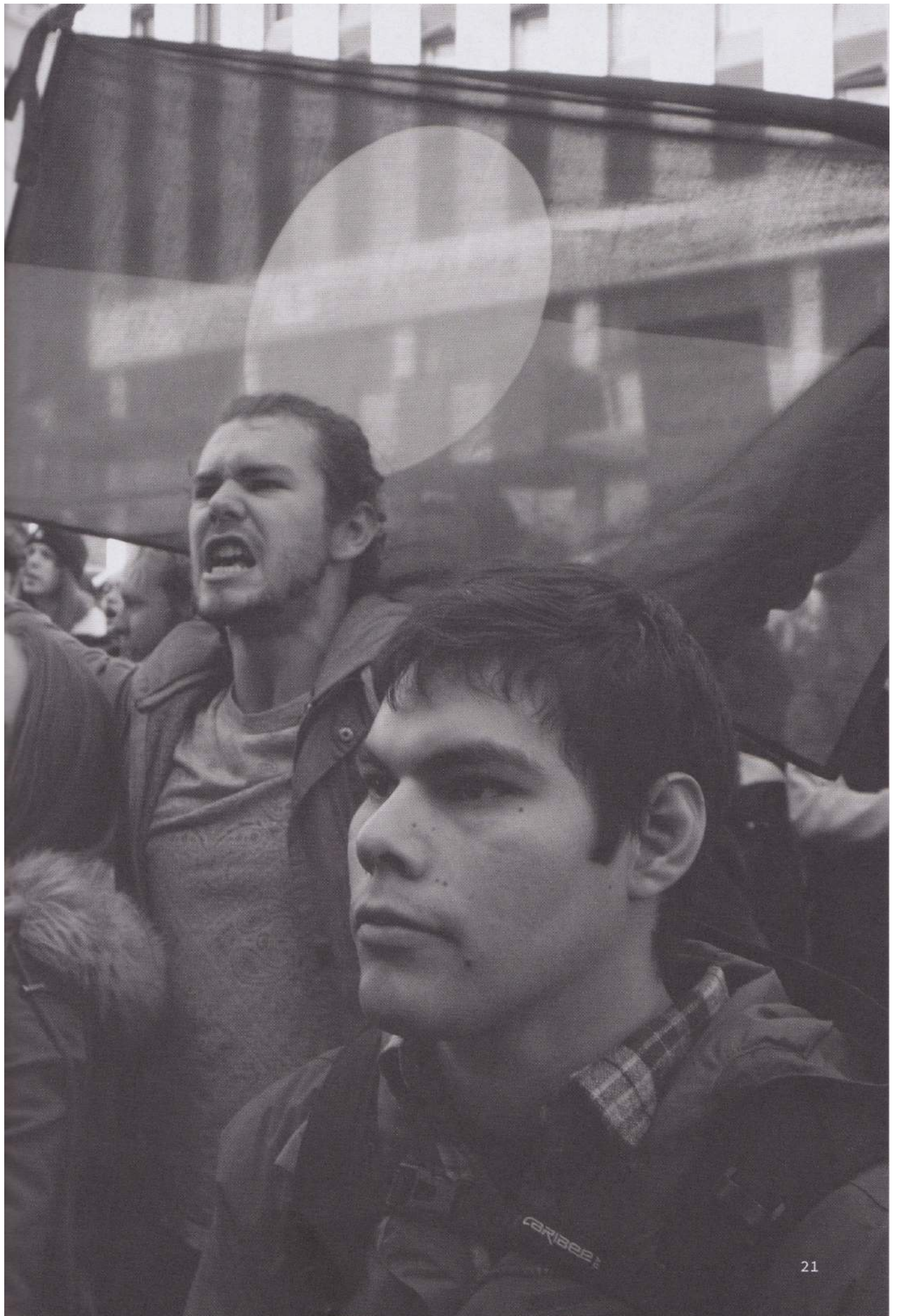
**Have you seen much change in writing opportunities since publishing a book?**

For me? Or the industry? Because people seem to think I know something about stuff. The publisher keeps offering me new contracts on books, which I assume means I'm doing something right. Other editors are a little quicker to give me work because they think I'm reliable, which is weird for me because I'm probably the last person you want running anything. That said, I'm living the dream. I get to do something that is incredibly special and interesting. Really, my whole job is to talk to interesting people about interesting things.

Broadly, the industry in Australia is just as tough as it is everywhere else. The business of industrial news is disaggregating. It's coming apart. Everything that used to make up a newspaper is now being spun off into its own thing. You get your commentary from Facebook or Twitter. You get your sport from a dedicated website. You go to realestate.com to advertise your house. You log onto Gumtree to put up a classified. This is bad news for journalism as it







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means the things that used to fund investigative and more creative journalistic projects are gone. You have to find some other way to fund them and then people still may not decide to give you their money. It's why I see books as one of the last avenues to counteract this. People still read, even though literacy rates in Australia are shockingly bad. People still pay for books. Books have authority. Books still earn you money. Not much – but enough to keep you going.

**What has been your biggest challenge since graduating from university?**

Working out how to get paid for the thing I was trained in.

**What is the most rewarding part of your work?**

Helping people. One of the most intense stories I did was on rape culture in South Korea after working with a group of survivors and feminist activists who were desperately trying to get someone to talk about the issue in a manner that was direct and free of euphemisms. Thanks to the persistent domestic reporting of the Korea Herald and a story I did in VICE that went viral, the Korean government announced a three-month crackdown into gender-based violence. Whether that actually means anything is debatable, but it was something.

**I can imagine deadlines can be very demanding in your line of work. As student's mental and physical wellbeing is becoming more and more of a focus on campus, what sorts of things do you like to do to relax and what motivates you to keep going?**

I am probably the worst person to ask about this because I don't know. My life is famine and flood. I often work myself to a pulp and then have to take time to recover. I make it through thanks to friends, coffee, shitty crime TV shows and strong drink. What keeps me going is both the need to pay rent and the understanding that what I do has meaning beyond me and my circumstances. Journalism is important. Done properly, it helps us know who are the heroes and who are the villains. It helps us shape our sense of self and understand what our future may be like.

**What future projects have you lined up for yourself/what are you currently working on?**

A couple of things. I'm thinking about setting up a podcast where each episode I interview a different person to talk about their work, their family, their lives and their cities. I was thinking that each week would be someone different. A Bunnings store greeter one episode, a street sweeper the next and a wanna-be actor after that. I have also just finished my next book on the mining boom. I've been explaining it to people as a book about what happens when a bunch of people suddenly come into a lot of money, are promised it's forever and then it goes away again. In a lot of ways it's a follow up to *The Death of Holden* and will be out sometime around September. It profiles different people at different levels of society to find out how this whole period changed us. I'm really quite proud of how it's turned out. Some of my best writing is going to be on display and it's probably my best book to date.

**Finally, what message do you have for students studying the same degree/area as you?**

Read. Especially read non-fiction books. Cover to cover. If you're coming up in this industry now, you're doing so without any understanding or knowledge of the history, origins or context of anything that happened before you were a teenager. The worst journalists in the business usually don't know anything beyond basic reporting techniques. Which is the second point: learn something more about the world than how to put together a newspaper or produce television. You need a sense of curiosity to succeed in this business. You need to show an interest in other people and be willing to learn. Whether that is something as lofty as economics or biology, or as something as everyday as computer games or food, having a niche gives you something to write about in between looking for the next big thing. ◊