



Melville author Miriam Miller.

Chronicles of the Wittenoom tragedy

A STORY about a former Wittenoom resident grew into a comprehensive collection of the personal stories of asbestos disease victims in Western Australia for Melville author Miriam Miller.

Ms Miller's book *Shattered Lives* explores the world of asbestos disease sufferers – telling the personal stories of dozens of workers, family members and spouses. She said the research for the book was quite extensive, and what she found was not quite what she had expected.

"I think that for most of these people the battle for compensation came towards the end (of their lives) and the main reason most of them wanted to get compensation was to provide for their families," she said. "It wasn't hatred or bitterness towards the companies, it was actually a case of financial necessity."

The book details the personal stories of a range of people who suffered from asbestos-related diseases – from the mine workers at Wittenoom, to dock workers who

unloaded the deadly fibre by the sackful, to men and women who helped their parents with home renovations during their childhood.

Ms Miller said it was important for her not to get too involved in the individual stories during the researching and writing process.

"They seemed to me to be very courageous," she said.

"I had a great deal of empathy for them but I think when you are writing a book like this you need a degree of detachment. Some of them had their exposure when they were very young."

Ms Miller said the burden on some of the victims had been overwhelming.

"It's a very difficult thing for people to come to terms with," she said. "Once they have been diagnosed they have an awful lot to deal with."

The book also suggests that Australia is yet to see the worst of asbestos-related diseases, with diagnoses expected to peak in the next decade.