

Media Notes

Screen Australia
presents
in association with
Screen NSW
Adelaide Film Festival Investment Fund
Shark Island Foundation
K2 Studios
and
Kismet Movies

A Stranger Than Fiction Production

EDGE of LIFE

‘A film about death that is all about living’

Writers **Lynette Wallworth & Chief Tashka Yawanawa**

Director **Lynette Wallworth**

Producer **Jo-anne McGowan**

Featuring **Muka Yawanawa, Dr Justin Dwyer and Dr Marg Ross**

Director of Photography: **Bentley Dean**

Editor **Karen Johnson**

Sound Designer **Liam Egan**

Sound Mix **Robert Sullivan**

Music **Antony Partos** with a song by **Kaline Yawanawa**



A STATEMENT FROM THE WRITER/DIRECTOR

“Might the lost knowledge of a good death help us create a better life?”

-LYNETTE WALLWORTH

When I was eleven years old, I died and was resuscitated. The expanded reality I experienced in those timeless few minutes when my heart stopped is the signature event of my life. After that, everything changed. Most essentially, I was, from that moment onward, no longer afraid of death. I was forever altered by having travelled to the Edge of Life. It's a simple thing to write in a sentence, it's a wholly life-changing perspective to live with. It sears you to humanity and indeed to the whole living planet, with a deeply connected love and yet it makes you absolutely aware that the inevitable death of the organic self will come, but that it is not the end of existence. It is simply a threshold to an expanded reality we all will, one day, experience.

As an eleven-year-old, I could barely put words to what I had experienced, but I became an artist so I could express this worldview in everything I did.

A psychedelic renaissance emerged decades after I died and then lived, and trials with psilocybin began to take place with patients in palliative care. I care very much about the transformative effect these dose sessions are having on many of the trial patients who often emerge from a six-hour dose session saying they have “rehearsed their own death” and were essentially, like me, no longer afraid to die. Not that they wanted to die right now; they were still charged by life, but their relationship to death had fundamentally altered. These words and sentiments I know only too well, and in my very first conversations with some of these patients, four years ago, I found myself in familiar territory, hearing thoughts that I too had long held close, as a strange child with an odd relationship to dying.

Our conversations then, because we had been to the same ‘state’ and experienced the same worldview, were different in depth and tone and understanding precisely because of this shared experience. I knew these same sentiments were expressed by friends from Indigenous communities whose cultures I have had the fortune to be invited to know. So, I knew too that my perspective on death was not unique, simply unusual in the context of my own cultural conditioning. I thought it was an essentially Western worldview, not a universal one. I thought it might be linked to the use of entheogens in many Indigenous communities. But in research for this film, I discovered it was not always like this. We have known across many cultures a different relationship to dying it seems, but in the West at least, we somehow lost the comfort of it and avoided the subject wherever possible.

We have created a largely death-denying culture, and the implications of that fixation are all around us. At Sundance last year, there were two films focused on a new industry born from advancements in AI, *Eternal You* and *Love Machina*. Both evidenced a new growth industry attempting to provide a salve to the grieving by using technology to keep the loved one ‘virtually’ alive, while someone pays the subscription fee. I watched with sadness. These industries will exploit the most vulnerable among us, the grieving. If we can die better, we help everyone, including those we leave behind. Seeing all that is unfolding in the West at this moment, I asked my friend Tashka if he would come on the journey of this film with me because, while the West opens up again to these powerful medicines, there is still a reluctance to go to the ‘knowledge holders’. Those who have held these portals to transcendence open for all of us for generations. And here we are.

We are at a threshold point, in many ways, in the Western world. If the renewal of access to these powerful keys to an expanded reality are once again emerging, they could trigger a profound cultural shift because if we change our relationship to death we change everything about the way we live, including how we die, what we value and what we cling to as we approach our physical decline. But

if the knowledge holders are not invited into the conversation, we risk doing what we have always done, extracting, exploiting and profiting, until the sacred is lost.

This is a unique moment in time just as Australia has legalised psilocybin for use in mental health and the first clinics emerge, we have the chance to ask what might shift the dial on how the 'medicine' is embraced? Might the 'lost knowledge' of a good death help us create a better life, not just for ourselves but for the ones to come?

That is the question we offer in *Edge of Life*, and what unfolds is an exploration of an answer.

SYNOPSIS

One Line

Can ancient medicines help us to reimagine our relationship to dying in a death-denying culture?

Synopsis

The doorway to death is the last great frontier in human life. Intellectually, we all know our lives will end, and yet - in the Western world at least - we act as if death is a mirage, disappearing the closer we move towards it.

Two doctors in Australia are using psilocybin to help ease the anguish of their patients at the end of life, and the results they have seen are truly remarkable.

But this visioning tool, like other plant medicines, is not new; it comes from ancient traditions. When the doctors journey to the Amazon to experience traditional medicines for themselves, they are confronted by realisations they have no explanation for.

Is it possible the world's oldest cultures have something important to teach us, not just about traditional medicines, but about death itself?

"This is not new knowledge; this is lost knowledge."



TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Duration: 01:50:09 (24fps)

Shooting format: Canon RAW with DJI and RED footage additions.

Video finished format: UHD Apple Pro Res 422 (HQ).

Theatrical finished format: DCP.

Original aspect ratio: Full Container (1.90).

Audio recording format: 24-bit Broadcast WAV.

Finished audio format/ track Information: 5.1 and stereo tracks.



We acknowledge and thank the Yawanawá people of the lands and waters of the Rio Gregório in the State of Acre in the Brazilian Amazon where we filmed.

We acknowledge and thank the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters on which we filmed in Australia.



ABOUT THE MAKING OF EDGE of LIFE

My relationship with Tashka was born at the Sundance Film Festival. We met when I attended the Skoll World Forum as part of a Sundance contingent. We formed a friendship there that has only grown over the years. Tashka invited me to come to the Amazon to create what would become Awavena, about the first Yawanawan female shaman. This project benefited from a Sundance New Frontier Residency and support from the Sundance/Skoll Stories of Change Lab. Through Awavena, we navigated new technologies informed by a Yawanawa worldview. So when I began to explore the subject matter of this film, Tashka was the first person I called. He has been by my side in developing the pathway of this film ever since.

In the tradition of all my previous works, I am testing the boundaries of new technologies, using volumetric captures in the form of Gaussian splats processed into raw point data then used to move out, above and around the scene. The look you will see in the last of these volumetric captures- Muka (the Yawanawa Shaman who guides our doctors) at the tree- shows the connection to my Emmy award-winning VR work, Awavena.

I am also working with artists I have long-standing relationships with, most significantly Mayan artist Sergio Petch Chez, who I met many years ago when presenting work in Vienna and have remained in contact with. When I began exploring the concerns in this work, Sergio offered to paint the Mayan understanding of the afterlife, and the conversations we have had in the years following have powerfully impacted this film. Sergio's paintings are delicately animated by Sohan Aerial-Hayes ('How to Live) using traditional techniques. The combination of these approaches points to the bridge this film is attempting to create across worlds and forms.

The heart of this film is a culmination of all my previous works, all I have encountered and learnt about the visioning technologies of Indigenous cultures and the severance from these technologies that we live with in Western culture. The question of how we might find a pathway towards one another is implied in every work I have ever done but is finally and explicitly explored here.

Chris Kerr

Very early in my research, I encountered the work of Dr Chris Kerr, who runs the Buffalo Hospice and Palliative Care in New York, USA. Chris's research has focused on the dreams of dying patients as they move closer towards death. These dreams, or perhaps better said, apparitions, most often involve 'seeing' a loved one who has died appearing as if in the room with the dying patient. These experiences bring enormous comfort; they are highly usual and consistent, as evidenced by Chris's research. In speaking with me early on in my research about this phenomenon, Chris gave me a landing point for the film when he said, "This is not new knowledge, Lynette; this is lost knowledge." This means that some sort of 'severing' has happened in Western culture to remove from us the understanding of what happens at the end of life. What should we expect? What might we experience? And that severing has alienated us from death to the extent that many people are terrified at the end of life. Chris assisted my endeavour to bring knowledge systems together to explore this severance.

Yawanawa use of Ayahuasca

I knew from conversations with my friend, Chief Tashka Yawanawa, that the Yawanawa people have a different relationship to death than many of us in the West. Tashka says, "Yawanawa are sad when someone dies, but we don't fear death." I knew the Yawanawa had a defined view of the afterlife, but I wondered if it may be that the use of ayahuasca as a visioning tool was what had contributed to their differently held relationship to dying. I wondered if the ability to 'leave the body' in a vision state, as offered by the ceremony, might be why the Yawanawa have such strongly held views of an afterlife beyond the body. In discussing that, Tashka told me the Yawanawa origin story of the use of ayahuasca, which is retold to us in the film by Muka. In this story, the Yawanawa recount their first experience with death, the death of a beloved Chief called Ruha. The Yawanawa, not knowing then what death was or how to manage it, treated Ruha's body like a dormant seed and planted it back in the ground. From Ruha's decomposing body, the leaves and vine that must be mixed together to create the visioning drink emerged. The story tells that the Yawanawa were overcome with their grief and loss and wanted to die to be with Ruha. So they first took the ayahuasca in hopes it might kill them. Instead, they travelled, out of their bodies, "to where Ruha was." In other words, the drink gave the Yawanawa the capacity to move out of material reality to a place where they could still connect with Ruha's spirit. This capacity allowed the Yawanawa to manage their grief and thus keep living. This connection with a calm resolution of the relationship to death and the use of psychedelics in palliative care is one of the revelations in our film. When Ros has her 'session', she, like the Yawanawa, meets with her deceased husband and parents, in an experience that completely shifts her own view and expectation of death.



Ros and Flavia



Both Ros and **Flavia** contributed to our film with a desire to create a greater understanding of how we might manage end-of-life care. Flavia's death was sudden for all of us, but in the short time we had to film her, her expressed desire to connect with Indigenous knowledge holders brought her into a virtual relationship with Mayan shamans Sergio and Daniel in her very last days. There, we see Daniel's expertise at offering 'instructions for the dying' that floored our doctors. Flavia's fears were not for herself, as we hear her say, "Death is easier for me" but she was most worried about the impact of her death on her partner Chris. In Chris's grieving process, he is given the experience of a psilocybin session with Justin, Marg and Muka during Muka's visit to Melbourne. The profound healing experienced in this moment is a turning point in the film. We see that the psychedelic experience offers Chris the same solace that the Yawanawa sought.....and with that solace he can go on.



Ros, who had more time, prepared her loved ones with the knowledge she had gained from her psychedelic sessions. She invited us to film so many aspects of her last days, most tenderly when she was with her family, holding a new baby that she knew she would not see grow up. In her unwavering trust in the 'adventure' of the process of dying, she was extraordinary to watch in her fearless turning towards an unknown future. Ros's ability to explain the impact of the psychedelic sessions effect is extremely important to our film. She was always a woman of faith but she says, "I believed these things, but I had not felt them." Her acknowledgement of the transformative impact of a direct experience of the mystical is a key message of the film. Ros' conversation with Muka in her beloved church on the historical impact of Christianity on Indigenous spiritual practices felt like an historic moment when we watched it gently unfold.

The Trial

I read of Marg and Justin's psilocybin trial for patients with terminal diagnoses at St Vincent's Melbourne in 2019 and approached Marg straight away. We talked, but we didn't meet in person until early 2020. Covid paused the trial, and when it began again, we reconnected. During Covid, I had been developing a podcast series based on different cultural understandings of what happens at death, and I interviewed Marg for the series. Both Marg and Justin were interested in my connections to Indigenous knowledge holders who were generously open to engaging with Western practitioners on the use of psychedelics in our culture. So the seeds for the film were loosely set in place, but as in every documentary, things unfold in ways that one might never have expected. I did not know, at the start, how removed from Justin's world view was the experience of the spiritual in any form....I listened to his explanations to patients of what he thought the psilocybin was doing, and I knew this would likely change dramatically should he be able to have his own 'hero dose.' St. Vincent's allowed us access to only one trial patient, Flavia, whose sudden death shocked all of us. Following that, they allowed us to film Ros and the heart of the film, walking with Ros as she fearlessly moves towards her own death, came about. Through every new step, Justin and Marg embraced the unforeseen experiment of the documentary: talking with Chris Kerr and Bill Richards, travelling to meet the Yawanawa, laughing and often crying along the way. Through it all, their commitment to marking the end of life with a better process was always at the fore. As Marg says at the end of our film, "When someone dies, we all need to become sherpas."

Bill Richards

One of the most knowledgeable people we meet in the film is Bill Richards. Bill is an elder in the field of psychedelics, a friend and mentor to Marg, Bill provides a perspective that can only come from someone who has been engaged in the work since the 1960s when he had his first psychedelic experience in a clinical trial in Germany at age 23. For me, the interview with Bill provided some of the clearest context for how we might use these tools going forward. He has given much thought to the ways these 'medicines' could help a death-denying culture, and his contemplations on the nature of reality and the 'considered' use of psilocybin are some of the 'jewels' in the film. Bill was able to say in words what I hoped the film would show: that there is a connection here to Indigenous worldviews and developing theories of quantum science that might lead us to an emerging world so we can reconnect to what we have lost.



Artist Collaborators

In order to make a film that deals with experiences that essentially can't be filmed, journeys into realms of consciousness, I knew I would need to turn to other artists whose imagery evoked concepts of time, space and transcendence. That was one of the great joys of making this film because I knew artists whose work was the perfect fit. Melbourne artist Daniel Crooks has a long history of creating stunning works that visualise a different concept of time. In his works, time extends and stretches in front of us, even in the most everyday moment. So when Justin returned from the Amazon, I knew Daniel's imagery would serve to show the disconnect he was feeling. Janie Fitzgerald is someone I worked with when making Awavena. I have watched the development of her gorgeous, fragile, glasslike flower animations as they emerged in recent years. I knew the audience would need something profoundly beautiful to match Bill Richards' philosophical contemplations on the nature of reality while he spoke, and so Janie's work came straight to mind. I found Julia Set Lab's work while searching for abstract imagery that could suggest the transcendent state and yet was filmed live. Sando Bocci was thrilled to be involved, and after we talked, he sent many new options for sections in the film that needed visual representation of a 'state of mind' that is elusive. His work is the perfect fit. Sergio has been painting the Mayan understanding of the afterlife since we began discussing the concept in 2020. His extraordinary paintings were always going to be central to the film, and there are so many more that we would not contain them all. I have worked with Sohan

Ariel Hayes many times in the past because of his beautiful animation work. In 2021, when I had a residency at AFTRS, Sohan helped guide the student work so we could create a proof-of-concept animation based on Sergio's paintings. So when the time came to deliver finished animation sequences for the film, I returned to Sohan, knowing he had the sensibility to deliver the delicately beautiful visual activations and animations that the film needed.



Composers Statement

Writing the original score for *Edge Of Life* was a unique opportunity to compose in a style that is truest to my nature. To have the scope to write music for a subject matter that affects us all and to do it in a transformative and uplifting manner was a career highlight for me. I wanted to create a score that had a transcendent quality, without being religious and to evoke an overall feeling of catharsis. I am naturally drawn to the music of Bach for its understated beauty and mathematical elegance. The universe is built on mathematical equations, and I wanted to imbue this notion in my musical language.

I was drawn to cyclical structures, but moreover ones that had a spiral quality. I created this by employing techniques where each time the melodic phrasing would start again, it did so in a different key. This gave the illusion of repeating, but also gave the composition a seemingly infinite journey without repeating itself exactly each time. I hope that the effect helps convey the notion of unlocking the mysteries of an infinite universe and our experience as a voyager in this life.

KEY CREDITS

Written by
LYNETTE WALLWORTH
CHIEF TASHKA YAWANAWA

Directed by
LYNETTE WALLWORTH

Produced by
JO-ANNE MCGOWAN

Film Editor
KAREN JOHNSON

Executive Producers
LYNETTE WALLWORTH
JENNIFER PEEDOM
DAVID GROSS
MARK KRESSER
TROY LUM

Cinematographer
BENTLEY DEAN

Original Score
ANTONY PARTOS

Additional Music and Voice
KALINE YAWANAWA

Sound Designer
LIAM EGAN

Re-recording Mixer
ROBERT SULLIVAN

KEY PEOPLE BEHIND THE SCENES

LYNETTE WALLWORTH, writer/director

Artist/filmmaker Lynette Wallworth is renowned for creating profoundly empathetic works while pushing the boundaries of emerging technologies. She works primarily in immersive documentary, including 360 film, virtual reality, interactive video, digital full dome and feature documentary. Wallworth's work has shown at the World Economic Forum, Davos, the Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts, the American Museum of Natural History, New York, the Smithsonian, the Royal Observatory Greenwich for the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad; Auckland Triennial; Adelaide Biennial; Brighton Festival and the Vienna Festival among many others as well as film festivals including - Sundance Film Festival, Venice Film Festival, London Film Festival, IDFA, CPHDOX, Sydney Film Festival, Adelaide Film Festival and Margaret Mead Film Festival.

Wallworth's works include the interactive video installation *Evolution of Fearlessness*; the DOMIE Award-winning full-dome feature *Coral*, the AACTA Award-winning documentary *Tender*, the Emmy® Award-winning virtual reality narrative *Collisions* and XR work *Awavena* which premiered at Sundance Film Festival, was in competition at the Venice Film Festival 2018 and in September 2020 garnered Lynette her 2nd Emmy® Award for Outstanding New Approaches in Documentary. Wallworth has been awarded a UNESCO City of Film Award and the Byron Kennedy Award for Innovation and Excellence, and in 2016, was named by Foreign Policy magazine as one of the year's 100 Leading Global Thinkers. In 2020, she initiated and directed the New Narratives Lab for the World Economic Forum to generate opportunities for under-represented voices. She has been an Artist in Residence at the Australian Film Television and Radio School, the Australian Human Rights Institute and the School of Cybernetics, ANU.

Lynette has a long-standing relationship with Sundance, having shown work at Sundance New Frontiers from 2009 onwards. She is the recipient of two New Frontier residencies for the creation of her VR and XR works *Awavena* and *Collisions*, both of which won Emmy awards for Outstanding New Approaches to Documentary. She is a member of the World Economic Forum's Metaverse Governance Working Group and a member of the Dubai Future Forum's Global 50 Experts, and she sits on the Technology Committee for the Sundance Institute.

CHIEF TASHKA YAWANAWA, co-writer TASHKA YAWANAWA is a chief of the Yawanawá people in Acre, Brazil, leading 1200 people and stewarding 400,000 acres of Amazon rainforest. The son of the former leader of the Yawanawá, Tashka grew up witnessing the virtual enslavement of his people by the rubber industry and experiencing the near annihilation of the tribe's culture by missionaries. After pursuing higher education abroad in 2001, Tashka returned to Brazil to use the knowledge gained from his experiences abroad to help his people transform their future. At just twenty-five, he became the youngest Chief in the history of the Yawanawá. Having spent several years in the United States, Tashka inherently understands the forces at work in both his and the Western worlds. As a result, he serves as an unusually effective bridge between Indigenous groups and the outside. Thanks to his efforts, the Yawanawá today maintain a balance between the modern and traditional: Enjoying a combination of strengthened spiritual and cultural identity, secured land-rights, and improved income generation, thanks to more effective, community-driven use of natural resources.

KAREN JOHNSON, editor Karen Johnson is an award-winning editor renowned for her storytelling skills and sensitivity to character. With a distinguished career spanning drama and feature documentaries, she has collaborated with some of Australia's most celebrated directors. In 2025, *Otto by Otto*, directed by Gracie Otto, won the AACTA Award for Best Documentary, with Johnson earning a nomination from the Australian Writers' Guild for her contribution as the film's writer. She also received a 2025 Best Editing AACTA nomination for James Bradley's feature documentary, *Welcome to Babel*. She was again nominated for Best Editing at the 2021 AACTA Awards for Gracie Otto's feature documentary *Under The Volcano* and again at the 2020 AACTA

Awards for feature documentary *Firestarter*. She won the 2018 AACTA Editing Award for Ben Lawrence's feature documentary *Ghosthunter*. Her extensive body of work includes Ivan Sen's 2001 critically acclaimed debut feature film *Beneath Clouds*, Rachel Perkins' 2000 poetic drama *One Night the Moon*, and Ben Lawrence's 2021 AACTA, Walkley and AWGIE-nominated feature documentary *Ithaka*, an intimate portrait of Julian Assange's father, John Shipton.

JO-ANNE MCGOWAN, producer. Jo-anne McGowan is an Emmy Award-winning producer with over 25 years of experience in documentaries and a passion for telling stories about the arts, history and social justice. In 2017, Jo-anne set up Stranger Than Fiction Films with Jennifer Peedom. That year, she also co-produced the feature documentary, *Mountain* – a collaboration with the Australian Chamber Orchestra, which had a sell-out live performance tour nationally. In 2021, the follow-up project RIVER was released, premiering at the Telluride Film Festival and winning the AACTA Award for Best Documentary and Best Music Score. Jo-anne also produced *David Stratton's Stories of Australian Cinema* as a feature documentary and TV series. The feature version was screened at Cannes Classics, and the television series was nominated for an International Emmy. Jo-anne produced *Harley & Katya* with Blayne Hoffman, which won an International Emmy in 2023.

BENTLEY DEAN, cinematographer. For the past 25 years Bentley had had the good fortune to help make extraordinary stories in some remarkable places including Al Queda camps in Kandahar - *The President Versus David Hicks*, Coups in Caracas- *Anatomy of a Coup*, First Contact in The Western Desert of Australia - *Contact*, and a Kastom village in Vanuatu for a unique collaborative feature film - *Tanna*; receiving multiple Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts Awards, Australian Directors Guild Awards, Walkley Awards, The Prime Ministers History Prize and a nomination for an Academy Award. For his cinematography, he has been a finalist at the prestigious Camera Image Cinematography Festival in both the Feature Narrative and Feature Documentary categories. For *Tanna* he won the Venice Critique's award for best cinematography and a Gold Award from the Australian Cinematography Society.

ANTONY PARTOS, composer. Antony Partos has written scores for the features *Sherpa*, *Tanna*, *Jasper Jones*, *Top End Wedding*, David Michôd's two films *Animal Kingdom* and *The Rover*, *The Director* and *The Jedi* and *Fahrenheit 451*. His many television drama credits include *The Artful Dodger*, *Bump*, *Last King of the Cross*, *Total Control*, *Mystery Road*, *Rake*, *The Slap* and *Wake In Fright*. Many have won major awards – including for him – with Jennifer Peedom's *Sherpa* being one of them. Antony is a board member of the Australian Guild of Screen Composers and a passionate supporter of creating and promoting Australian content. He is a co-founder and director of Sonar Music based in Sydney. He loves blending acoustic and electronic elements with exotic instruments.

LIAM EGAN, sound designer Liam Egan is the winner of the 2024 Australian Screen Sound Guild Lifetime Achievement Award. His career spans more than 40 years, over 100 feature films and at least 100 documentaries, working with Australia's finest directors including Warwick Thornton, Leah Purcell and Lynette Wallworth. Films include *Cargo* (2017), *Danger Close* (2019), *The Legend Of Molly Norman* (2021), *Harley & Katya* (2023), *The New Boy* (2023) and *The Deb* (2024).

ROBERT SULLIVAN re-recording mixer Robert Sullivan is one of Australia's most renowned sound and re-recording mixers. For the past 30 years, he has worked across a range of documentary and scripted programs for television and film, which have gone on to receive multiple accolades. His work has been featured in George Miller's Academy Award Winning *Happy Feet*, Warwick Thornton's Cannes nominated feature, *New Boy*, Simon Stone's AACTA award winning film *The Daughter* and Selina Miles' Emmy award winning documentary *Harley & Katya* amongst many others. Robert has received AFI Best Sound Awards for Ray Lawrence's *Jindabyne*, Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah* and Stuart Beatie's *Tomorrow When The War Began*. He was awarded the Australian Centenary Medal in the 2001 Queens New Years Honours List for his services to Australian Society and Australian Film Production.

STRANGER THAN FICTION. The company was founded in 2015 by Jennifer Peedom and Jo-anne McGowan. The work gained renown from its quality, popularity, awards and the festival interest it attracted. Projects include: *Mountain*, which was released in cinemas in 27 countries and was the most popular documentary in Australian cinemas for seven years; *River*, which screened at Telluride and won the AACTA Award in the documentary category; *Harley & Katya*, which was in the Netflix top 10 in six countries and won an International Emmy; and Emmy nominated *David Stratton: A Cinematic Life*, which played in Cannes. Stranger than Fiction is continuing to build its formidable documentary slate and branching into fictional narrative.

