

MEMORIES
AND
ELEPHANTS
THE ART
OF CASUAL
RACISM

Meaghan
Katrak Harris

the kind press

WITH
APOLOGIES TO
HELEN
GARNER
AND
THANKS TO
ELIZABETH
GILBERT

You didn't know why this compulsion to write had hit you now, but it had sideswiped you in a way that left you reeling, breathless.

You had always liked the idea of writing, but this was different. It'd come like a wave of urgency, leaving you dizzy and discombobulated.

Like the first thrill of a love affair, it was all you could think about.

Having been employed in the university world for the past decade, you had written academic things, of course, a few texts and articles. Now, your head was buzzing with stories—your stories—and you felt compelled to get them down.

But why now, this desire to move beyond academia and write? Was this about getting older, about making sense of your own life, your own history? *Hardly contemplation time with two kids still at school*, you

thought, sitting in the car line, waiting for the school bell to go and the littlest one to come rushing out, curls flying.

You felt a sense of urgency to read as well, essays or memoir-based stories in particular. Thank goodness; it made you feel less absorbed in your own stories, which played on a constant loop in your head.

You had specific authors in mind who resonated, whose thoughts and ideas had lodged in your mind, resurfacing now and then in your thoughts, and you were drawn back to them.

You'd read Helen Garner over the years. Who hasn't? An icon in Australian literature who writes non-fiction and semi-autobiographically, her prolific career spanning four decades.

You remembered discussing her with a friend—having both just read, and loved, one of her books—years ago.

You remembered saying critically to your friend, 'Yes, but I read this article on how she draws from *everything* ... I mean, imagine having her at the Christmas table, taking it all down!'

It was Garner's own ruthless self-critique that you

were in awe of, her great skill of including herself in her unflinching social commentary. Now you were desperate to read everything she had ‘taken down’ with an obsessive interest. Now you were riveted by the honest elegance of her writing. You knew now your criticism had been born of enviousness of her ability to direct her unflinching gaze onto her own character.

You remembered a quote about Joan Didion, saying ‘Joan writes to know what she thinks.’ *Is that what it’s all about?* you wondered. *Working out what you think?*

You rushed to a local bookshop.

‘Joan Didion?’ replied the matron behind the counter. ‘Which book?’

‘Oh, what do you have?’ you asked hopefully.

‘Well, none,’ she replied, peering over her glasses. ‘*There is nothing new.*’

For some reason, that annoyed you greatly. The thought that a book has to be new to be of value—in a bookshop, no less.

You went home and got online. Within twenty-four hours, you had three Joan Didion and four Helen Garner texts on your bedside table, one of Didion’s

having been first published in 1968—so no, not new.

You were very cognisant of the fact you could, in fact, afford to order seven books at once. This hadn't always been the case and you felt fortunate.

You were in the thrall of these texts, the academic paper you were working on languishing in Google Docs.

You started making deals with yourself. Work on the paper for four hours, then you can write something. Edit today's work on the paper and you can read something else.

You headed to the school car line earlier and earlier, telling yourself you'd never get a spot if you didn't, and you'd have to queue for ages. You sat in the sun and read, without guilt, waiting for the school bell.

You've always been a reader, but you hadn't read with this intensity for years.

'Do you think *everyone* thinks they can write?' you asked your husband.

'Everyone like us,' he replied nonchalantly.

You wondered what he meant by *us*, your life experiences having been so very different. Him with his classical education. You who didn't finish year 9

at Robinvale High. You had gone on to earn bachelor, master's and PhD degrees, but still, you'd had to check if it was a 'classic' or 'classical' education—the kind you didn't have.

'Should I do a course? A master's in creative writing?' You felt embarrassed, self-indulgent, trying to convey the enormity of this feeling, of this urgency, to him.

'I think you should just write, Meagh,' he answered.
Just write.

You'd moved on to Garner's movies. Your husband came in while you were watching.

'*Monkey Grip?*' he asked.

You thought it was his copy you first read, twenty-five years ago.

He watched as Nora's (played by Noni Hazlehurst) young daughter, Gracie (played by Garner's actual daughter, Alice), was getting some money for a school excursion from her mother's purse while her mother stirred, having slept in with her new lover.

'Those were the days,' your husband quipped. 'When the kids got themselves ready for school while you laid in bed with your lover.'

'It doesn't seem to have done Alice Garner any harm,'

you snapped. ‘She’s a successful classical musician and actor, has a PhD in history and lives next door to her mother with her husband and three kids.’

Your husband knew you well enough to not be surprised or alarmed by your sudden expertise in all matters Garner.

You extended your Australian reading obsession to Julia Baird’s new text *Phosphorescence*, a book that grabbed you intensely. A perfect mix of memoir, academic and literary.

Before you finished the first chapters, you’d ordered a copy for two friends, one of whom had lost a dear friend to cancer and one who was in COVID-19 lockdown.

As you stretched out the final chapters (you didn’t want it to end), Baird talked of her introduction to Helen Garner’s work twenty years ago, of devouring her work in a fever. You might have been late to the party, but you felt in good company.

You remembered the Elizabeth Gilbert book you read a few years ago, *Big Magic*—all about creativity. Gilbert is an award-winning fiction and non-fiction writer who is probably most well known for her bestseller *Eat, Pray,*

Love. This is her story of self-discovery after her divorce that takes her on a spiritual odyssey through Italy, Bali and India. It was also made into a blockbuster movie.

Gilbert herself doesn't consider it her best work, but is wonderfully philosophical about the craft of writing and the sometimes-arbitrary nature of success.

You had read *Big Magic* a few years ago, and enjoyed it, but it hadn't galvanised you into action in any way, creatively. You felt a sudden compulsion to read it again and rushed to get it off the shelf.

This time it knocked your socks off.

Gilbert describes:

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up for an instant, and I felt a little sick, a little dizzy. I felt like I was falling in love, or had just heard alarming news, or was looking over a precipice to something beautiful and mesmerising, but dangerous.

I'd experienced these symptoms before, so I knew immediately what was going on ... I believe I can confidently call it by its name: inspiration.

This explained exactly what you had been feeling in tangible waves, and you ploughed through the book. You felt almost panic-stricken, as though this thing would pass you by if you didn't grab it now, get hold of it, whatever it was. Thankfully, Gilbert follows this recognition of 'The Magic' with the sound advice of 'Do the Work'. Inspiration will come and go, just keep doing the work.

She talks about finding the pleasure and fun in the craft, and isn't a fan of the tortured-artist trope. You didn't feel tortured at all. You felt happy and free and light.

You spontaneously started taking notes all the time—ideas, phrases, thoughts. You had read in more than one memoir-inspired essay that this is what writers do, and wondered why you hadn't realised that. The idea of inspiration and how it strikes and surrounds you, like you were in on it for the first time.

On Instagram, author Trent Dalton posted ideas and visual inspiration for this latest novel straight from his mood wall—or 'fever wall', as he called it. Dalton explained: 'Because I think you have to be a little feverish with the story you love when you're writing it,

a little ill with it.' You knew that feverish, punch-drunk-in-love and slightly obsessed feeling.

You updated your husband: 'Liz Gilbert says that most writers get rejected two hundred times on average before they're published ... I've only got about twelve stories in me!'

'Just write, Meagh, just write.'