



DEBRA
ADELAIDE

The Women's Pages

THE WOMENS PAGES

Debra Adelaide



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Blurb

*Ellis, an ordinary suburban young woman of the 1960s, is troubled by secrets and gaps in her past that become more puzzling as her creator, Dove, writes her story fifty years later. Having read *Wuthering Heights* to her dying mother, Dove finds she cannot shake off the influence of that singular novel: it has infected her like a disease. Instead of returning to her normal life she follows the story it has inspired to discover more about Ellis, who has emerged from the pages of fiction herself — or has she? — to become a modern successful career woman.*

*The Women's Pages is about the choices and compromises women must make, their griefs and losses, and their need to fill in the absent spaces where other women — especially those who become mothers — should have been. And it is about the mysterious process of creativity, about the way stories are shaped and fiction is formed. Right up to its astonishing conclusion, *The Women's Pages* asserts the power of the reader's imagination, which can make the deepest desires and strangest dreams come true.*



Background to The Women's Pages

The Women's Pages began life as the short story 'The Sleepers in That Quiet Earth', first published in *Best Australian Stories* (ed Cate Kennedy, Black Inc, 2011) and reprinted in Debra Adelaide's acclaimed collection *Letter To George Clooney* (Picador, 2013). 'The sleepers in that quiet earth' are the final words of *Wuthering Heights*, and despite the fact that the story was complete, the ideas and characters in it continued to preoccupy the author. Debra Adelaide knew she was not finished with the way *Wuthering Heights* had taken over her imagination. More correctly, the novel and the story were not finished with her.

At the end of 'The Sleepers in That Quiet Earth' the mother of the protagonist Dove dies, soon after they have finished re-reading *Wuthering Heights*. By then Dove has created the story of Ellis (the name inspired by Emily Brontë's pseudonym, Ellis Bell) and believes she understands finally what it is all about. But this story, formed in strange dreams and arriving at a moment of crisis in her life, will not go away.

And so, *The Women's Pages* resumes the story of Dove and her fictional character Ellis, filling in the story of the latter from her childhood, and finding and following unexpected connections between the two characters. It is inspired by Emily Brontë's famous novel rather than being a rewriting of it, but plucks at the same thematic heartstrings: strange and fractured families, dangerous love, irrational choices fuelled by passion, and the mysterious gaps left by absent mothers.

About the Author

Debra Adelaide is the author or editor of over twelve books, including the best-selling *Motherlove* series (1996-98) and *Acts of Dog* (2003). Her novels include *The Hotel Albatross* (1995), *Serpent Dust* (1998) and the best-selling *The Household Guide to Dying* (2008), which was sold around the world. In 2013 she published her first collection of short stories, *Letter to George Clooney*, which was long- and short-listed for three literary awards. Her most recent book is the edited collection, *The Simple Act of Reading* (2015). She is an associate professor in creative writing at the University of Technology, Sydney.





Thematic & Plot Summary

Dove had planned the story and already written something that could be an opening chapter. From time to time when ideas came she would write them down in a book her mother had given her . . . As she made her breakfast and put a load in the washing machine, she continued to see her character and hear her voice . . . She was surprised to discover [Ellis] had developed into a good wife, a fond mother, a devoted daughter. There was no evidence of the sadness of her early years, of the great hole in her life.

Ellis, an ordinary suburban young woman of the 1960s, is troubled by secrets in her past that become more puzzling as her creator, Dove, writes her story fifty years later. Having read *Wuthering Heights* to her dying mother, Dove finds she cannot shake off the influence of that singular novel. Instead of returning to her normal life as a graphic designer she follows the story the novel has inspired to discover more about Ellis, finding ‘uncanny personal connections’ (p 12) between herself and her character.

For Dove, writing is both an obsessive and a torturous process, a ‘feverish, urgent need’ (p 10), and she exercises little control over her story and its characters. Scenes come to her vividly and immediately, with ‘the undeniable sensation of having peered into a character and seen her entire life, her story, her personality, as complete as it would ever be’ (p 27–8). Yet there are also gaps and silences and she can never be quite certain they will be filled. Gradually, though, Dove writes Ellis into life and she emerges from the pages of fiction – and from Dove’s own deepest needs and desires – to become a modern successful career woman.

The absent mother is a powerful and moving theme in the novel. Ellis is ‘a woman who had never known her own mother and whose life thus was and always would be undermined by the terrible loss, indeed a tragedy that claimed her from the start’ (p 184). The more Dove delves into the lives of her characters the more she discovers her story is about ‘missing or silent women’ (p 164). Both Ellis and Dove are part of a story ‘in which mothers in particular [are] absent’ (p 164). Dove’s mother, Jane, has just died, and like Charlotte Brontë writing *Shirley* in a welter of grief over Emily’s death, Dove is writing to fill the ‘emptiness that might never be filled’ (p 133). Jane, in fact, was Dove’s adopted mother, and Dove knows nothing of her biological mother – until, of course, she writes her into being in the astonishing conclusion to the novel. Similarly, Ellis’s mother is a silence her father will never fill, and Nell Wood, who knows the whole story, is unwilling to tell it. Both women go ‘through life with the wind forever whistling through a space in her chest’ (p 184), space left by mothers who are missing or silent.

The novel is filled with a warm and steady and sometimes fierce compassion for the losses and griefs of women’s lives, and for those casual violations that go unremarked but that cause such damage. These casual violations are startling, yet also disturbingly ordinary. After Ellis first has sex with Ron, without fully understanding what is happening to her, he tells her: ‘Your fault . . . So damn sexy. I just couldn’t help myself’ (p 50). When Les, his lips ‘beery wet’ (p 21), makes a pass at Ellis in the kitchen whilst the church women gossip outside, she rebuffs him politely, forgivingly, and he returns with: ‘Don’t know what’s up your arse, love . . . Suppose you’ve just always been a tight bitch.’ (p 23) Jabe squeezes Dove’s breast almost affectionately one day in the student bar: ‘Unbelievable: he was groping her while carrying on a conversation . . . she would wonder if it was simply her incorrigible politeness, or if there was something more to it, if she were too passive, a willing victim. Was there something about her that invited people to



Thematic & Plot Summary

violate her?’ (p 58–60). Women are left to carry the blame and the shame of unwanted sexual advances that go unremarked but yet cause such ‘damage and violation’ (p 133).

In her 1850 preface to *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë wrote in reference to her sister Emily: ‘the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master’. This is very visible in *The Women’s Pages*, which is a novel about writing a novel – a metafiction. Dove, the writer, sees whole scenes vividly, then the scene simply stops: ‘No credits, nothing. She had no idea what would come next, or even if she would be allowed to witness it’ (p 198); ‘she had been foolish enough to think she exercised some control over the story . . . Now she knew she understood very little about what she was doing’ (p 277). There are some wonderful, intimate descriptions of the uncanny way stories and novels come into being – an example of this is the powerful and complex dream Dove has of dragging Ellis ‘out of the earth’ reviving her, brushing off the cold earth and restoring her to life (p 13). *The Women’s Pages* is as much a novel about the writing process as it is about the characters who are created out of that process.

The novel also explores the idea that reading itself is a creative act. Dove’s reading of *Wuthering Heights* exerts a powerful force over her, particularly after she reads it aloud to her mother on her deathbed. She is drawn to the blank spaces, the silences in Emily Brontë’s novel, and it is into these gaps that her imagination flows: ‘It was reading that had brought Dove to this. Reading that novel . . . had infected her imagination’ (p 7); ‘The novel had unfolded again and again to be something different every time’ (p 7–8). Through writing Dove is able to bring to life a mother she never knew, and through reading we are able to be part of the creative act that brings Ellis not only to life but *into* her daughter’s life. *The Women’s Pages* asserts the power of the reader’s imagination to make the deepest desires and strangest dreams come true.

Like many of Debra Adelaide’s short stories and novels, *The Women’s Pages* takes an affectionately wry look at the domestic realm of women, from Ellis’s easy competence at keeping house, to Dove’s distracted care of her mother’s maidenhair ferns and haphazard affection for Viv the cat. Ellis may be very capable in this world of domesticity, yet she is out of step with it, as is beautifully illustrated by the descriptions of Betty’s tenth wedding anniversary party. For Ellis suburbia is stultifying, and she, like Australia as a nation, is ready to throw off the restrictions of the 1950s. But for Ellis and other women discovering feminism and dealing with the ‘compromises of being personally empowered, progressive and open-minded’ (p 182), there is no juggling family life with a career – she has to choose one or the other, to be ‘accountable for all modern women who dared to have a career and who might betray the great faith their male employers were starting to put in them by being weak enough to fall in love, or to have children’ (p 193). This has very painful and far-reaching consequences – and, in a way, it is where this sophisticated and dazzling novel begins.



Writing Style

1. *The Women's Pages* is inspired by Emily Brontë's novel, *Wuthering Heights*, and the links between the two are 'as knotty as a root of heath' (to quote from Charlotte's 1850 preface). Ellis is named for Ellis Bell, the pseudonym under which Emily Brontë wrote. From the very start we are alerted to the thematic importance of the Brontë novel in the annotated copy Dove finds in her mother's flat: 'Chapt 16: *C dies halfway through novel, it stated. Absent mother theme reinforced*' (p xx). Dove is drawn to fill in the gaps in the novel, to imagine the 'missing and silent' mothers: 'They were all dead or dying, or simply blank spaces, unnamed and unacknowledged, as if their progeny ... had been produced by magic, or they had just sprung up out of the earth like the primaevial rocks or heather that spread across the windy moors' (p 9). Both novels are 'generational box puzzles', with complicated framing narratives, and the final telling of Ellis's mother's story, with its characters Nell, Edgar, Catherine and Cliff, refers us directly to *Wuthering Heights*. There are many knots tying the two novels together; how does your reading of *Wuthering Heights* inform your reading of *The Women's Pages*, and vice versa?
2. The novel also draws on what little is known of Emily Brontë's life. Emily's own mother died when she was three years old, and her two older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, died a few years later, so Emily, like Ellis and Dove, must also have been haunted by missing and silent women. Read her poem 'Encouragement' to see how she barely contains her wild and terrible grief at her mother's death, and identify other biographical details in *The Women's Pages*. The novel is like a set of babushka dolls: it keeps opening up to reveal more and more layers. Reflect on the ways that incorporating biographical details adds new layers to our understanding of the novel.
3. *The Women's Pages* is a novel about the mysterious ways stories are born, and it's also about babies being born (there are some beautiful, yearning descriptions of babies) and women becoming mothers. In a number of striking images writing and giving birth are both described as shocking, elemental forces. 'Birth [was] a force that was elemental – shocking and exhilarating' (p 202); 'the story was pulling her back with a shocking elemental force' (p 222). Emily's second novel, which she buries up on Top Withins (a place, incidentally, that held great imaginative power for Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes), is described as being 'born a deformed thing, a puny weak creature that could not stand against the raw, healthy force of her firstborn' (p 210). Writing is often likened to giving birth; why, and how realistic do you think this analogy is?
4. As in all Debra Adelaide's writing *The Women's Pages* uses language in a subtle and deliciously evocative way. There are some wonderful and funny descriptions of food and cooking that are used not just to evoke the period but also to carry emotion. Right at the start of the novel, Ellis has been shopping at an Italian green grocers; she's drawn to the 'oily heaven' and 'glossy globes' of eggplant (p 4), but she knows Vince prefers 'savoy cabbage lightly boiled and smothered in butter' (p 4) and would never like Gino's caponata, 'a lovely new word that sounded like a musical term' (p 4). These are vivid and sensual descriptions, and immediately we sense Ellis's frustration, and her difference, and we know her marriage to Vince is doomed. Identify other passages that use food in such subtle and imaginative ways.



Writing Style

5. As metafiction – fiction that ‘self-consciously draws attention to its status an artefact’ – *The Women’s Pages* also reflects on the way language is constructed, how it develops. ‘Wuthering: that was a made-up word, surely? Dove had researched it and could find no instance of the term before 1846. Wuthering was a true neologism, one that Emily Brontë fashioned from the local dialect’ (p 181). Tom Sanders tells Ellis that language can be invented – and he gives the example ‘the cluttery draw’ (p 177), and Ellis realises that ‘language [is] mobile, shifting. And democratic. It was not as if there was some law that said an ordinary person couldn’t have a hand in it’ (p 177). New words are being added to the dictionary all the time (check out ‘mansplain’, the Macquarie Dictionary’s Word of the Year for 2014). How has language changed in your lifetime?



Questions for Discussion

The Women's Pages began life as the short story 'The Sleepers in That Quiet Earth', first published in *Best Australian Stories* (ed Cate Kennedy, Black Inc, 2011) and reprinted in Debra Adelaide's acclaimed collection *Letter To George Clooney* (Picador, 2013). Read the story (it is available online at <http://www.panmacmillan.com.au/resources/LetterToGeorgeClooneyESampler.pdf>) and discuss how its themes are developed and expanded upon in *The Women's Pages*. The short story has been described as the novel's poor relation. Do you agree?

1. The absent mother is a central theme in the novel. Discuss this in relation to Dove and Ellis, and explore the idea of absent mothers and/or 'missing or silent' women in your own lives.
2. The knotty roots of *Wuthering Heights* snake throughout *The Women's Pages*, both literally and thematically, and prompt lots of delightful and curious questions. One concerns Nell Wood, the housekeeper, who tells Ellis the story of her mother, Catherine; like Nelly Dean, her namesake in *Wuthering Heights*, Nell Wood is not an entirely reliable narrator. Why? And what spaces does this open up in the narrative? Is there an alternative reading of Catherine's life?
3. 'Ellis had stepped out of a longer story, one in which women were always grasping for some sense of authenticity' (p 164). How does the novel explore the choices and compromises women make in order to live authentic lives? Would you be prepared to make the same choices as Ellis? In the 1970s she faced a stark choice between motherhood and career; do you think this is still relevant for women?
4. *The Women's Pages* is a novel about writing a novel; it calls attention to the writing process itself. This is known as metafiction, which is a relatively new term, but as Patricia Waugh points out in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, 'the practice is as old (if not older) than the novel itself'. Do some brief research on metafiction – it's a fascinating topic – and find some examples of novels you have read that fit this category. Dove reminds us that the characters are 'imaginary people' (p 121) (as indeed she is), and in fact she gets rid of a character – Charlie – when he no longer fits into her story. Does having your attention drawn to the fact the novel is constructed, that the characters are not real, enhance your enjoyment or detract from it?
5. 'It was too casual. It was surreal. J, she knew, was their friend. She should shove him away and cry out. They would be puzzled, offended, hurt. J would continue smiling, holding his hands up as if to show how clean they were . . . She would be considered a fool. How rude it would be to accuse their friend of groping her, if that's what it was. What a breach of good manners it would be to cry out, here in a public place, and protest that she was being mistreated so' (p 59). Both Dove and Ellis experience this kind of casual sexual violation; what keeps them from speaking out against it, and what is the cost to them of silence? Recently a senior vascular surgeon, Dr Gabrielle McMullin, stated that sexual harassment was rife in the medical profession and that women jeopardise their careers if they speak out about it; do you think it is any easier these days for women to speak out than it was fifty years ago, when Ellis was starting out in her career?
6. There is a clever and surprising twist at the end of the novel. What do you make of it?



Questions for Discussion

7. For Dove, *Wuthering Heights* ‘unfolded again and again to be something different every time’ (p 7–8); she reads the gaps in the novel and fills them with her imagination. Junot Diaz said that by reading ‘we exercise those two most sacred of human vocations: compassion and creativity’. How is the act of reading a creative one?
8. Debra Adelaide has been described as a comic and ironic novelist. Did you find this novel comic – if so, in what ways?
9. Dove says she has been infected by *Wuthering Heights*, like a ‘mosquito-borne tropical fever [that will] never let her go’ (p 8). Have you had this experience with a novel; if so, which one?