

BOOK REVIEW

Marie Williams *Green Vanilla Tea*
Sydney, Finch Publishing, 2013; 256 pp
ISBN: 9781921462993

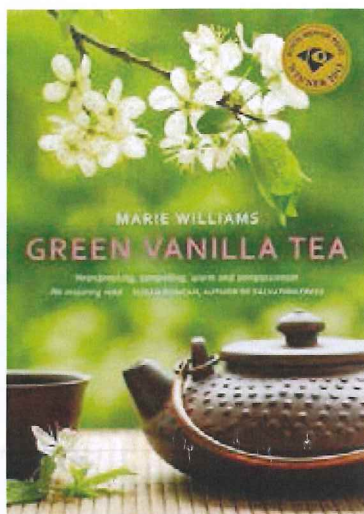
Dementia is an old person's condition isn't it? Well, that's what I thought until I read this memoir. It may be rare but dementia can attack younger people.

Marie Williams, the author, is a social worker and family therapist who worked in community health in Brisbane. She is the mother of Michael and Nic and the widow of Dominic. The book is about the family's journey before, during and after Dominic was diagnosed with fronto-temporal lobar dementia and motor neurone disease. It is beautifully written and exposes all the heartbreak that the family experienced over the four and half years from her first realising something was different to Dominic's death in an aged care facility.

Marie and Dom grew up in South Africa where they married. They moved to Canada, then to Brisbane. Dom was a university lecturer in town planning and regularly undertook projects in developing countries like Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Dom's behaviour started changing when he was 40. From being a loving and engaged father and husband he became withdrawn and expressionless. He also developed an obsessive need to walk day and night. These behaviours became progressively worse over a two year period. Marie also discovered that the husband, who had always managed their finances, was giving generously to what she thought looked like every charity in Australia. On one trip to Vietnam he rang and told her he had given hundreds of dollars to a taxi driver, then couldn't remember the pin on his cards which were captured by the ATM. Marie had to organise funds through a local branch of their Australian bank so he could get home.

As you can imagine, no-one could work out what was going on. Dom had refused to visit a doctor until Marie tricked him into going. Dementia was the last illness on people's minds, but in the end a series of tests discovered both dementia and motor neurone disease. Marie had to organise with the university for Dom to be medically retired, and had to take over sole management of the family. This was the more difficult because when he was lucid, Dom insisted for a long time that he wanted to drive; that he had to go to work; that he had to organise his next trip.

Throughout his decline, Marie was fortunate to have the support of a network of friends and colleagues to help her while Dom was still at home. But above all, the support she got from her sons who went from early to late teens



watching their father completely change was extraordinary and showed an incredible mental and emotional maturity. It must have been so difficult for them to explain to friends that their father, younger than some of their friends' fathers, had dementia. Of course, community services were also not set up to deal with a younger person having dementia and a family with two children in their teens.

Dom always loved the ritual of drinking tea and the book title refers to the fact that he loved to make green vanilla tea for anyone who visited although, as he declined, he often forgot to boil the kettle first. Marie says green vanilla tea is quite good cold.

Finally, the decline brought on by both dementia and motor neurone disease meant that Dom had to be admitted to an aged care facility about two years after he was diagnosed. Marie visited him every day and Nic and Michael visited regularly. Marie's friends made a quilt using all sorts of mementoes of the family's life. Marie, who is also an artist, did fabric painting and printing of special photos. The boys helped choose items for the quilt and it was hung in Dom's room at the nursing home so he would have a connection with the family. Dom's health deteriorated rapidly in the few months until his death. Many of Marie's relatives asked her to write about what had happened but she declined until Michael and Nic also asked her. They were involved in the evolution of the book.

This is an intensely poignant and searingly honest account of the Williams' journey. It is truly inspiring and deserved to win the 2013 Finch Memorial Prize by Finch Publishing for the best unpublished life story or memoir.

Diane Hague

Dr Joanna Penglase *continued from page 4*

a strong belief that such children would turn delinquent, hence the notorious 'training' schools. There was no recognition of the *emotional pain* of children separated from their families. Children ran away and no-one questioned why. It was comparable to being in prison – people spoke of being an 'inmate' and 'prison routine'. Although some Homes were better than others (for example, Barnardos had learned from a postwar inquiry in Britain that rejected institutional care for children), overall it was a completely uncaring system.

Not until the late 1970s did change start to occur – but it was several decades before the terrible history came to light. In November 2009 the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, urged on by Jenny Macklin, apologised to the Forgotten Australians in the Great Hall in Canberra. Opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull said the words that Forgotten Australians had been waiting to hear: 'We believe you'.

Joanna eventually wrote a book about this bleak story, *Orphans of the Living – growing up in care in 20th century Australia* (2009). She ended her work with CLAN in 2010 but keeps in touch with the issues and with Leonie Sheedy, who remains a vital force advocating for and supporting this marginalised group of Australians.

Transcription by Helen Ruby

Report by Kris Clarke