

TESSA LUNNEY

Debra Adelaide, *The Women's Pages*

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It was reading that had brought Dove to this. Reading that novel when she was a teenager, or whenever it was she had first read it, then again as a young woman, when she had underlined great slabs of the text in ink, for some reason she could not now remember, and then yet again to her mother as she lay in hospital dying—reading it had infected her imagination. It was like a malaria of the brain... (7)

Wuthering Heights is a book of overt passion, of tempests within and without that batter multiple generations, of long first-person accounts that are biased and brilliant. It was written by a woman who was fiercely intelligent, fiercely brave, and so fiercely shy that we know little about her. *The Women's Pages* uses these ideas—multi-generational sagas, sisters, strong women, passion without outlet or without restraint, letters and diaries and misplaced words—to write a story about living through story, about identity through narrative and language.

Ellis is a young woman, emotionally detached from her homemaker life in 1960s Annandale. Her movements are precise, her love and passion guarded and then carefully used, as though in short supply.

Ellis is Dove's creation. Dove is 38, not old and not young, caring for her mother as she dies. Dove is adopted, and her adoptive mother Jane never married or had other children. There seems to be no other family. When Jane dies, Dove is alone, apart from her creation, Ellis.

For Ellis does keep Dove company. Ellis's reality is assured from the start—the book begins with her story, the writing is clear and vibrant, her emotions more nuanced and subtle, at times, than Dove's own. Dove's lack of life is due to Ellis's vibrant fictional one. Dove knows it, but her obsession means she can do nothing about it—she screams in

frustration when she cannot “hear” her characters as they talk in her head, but she rarely, if ever, talks to others of her story. Dove lives through Ellis:

The story gnawed at her heart, when it was not burrowing through her mind. Within weeks it was pulling her back with a shocking elemental force, and she found herself unlocking the drawer and reading through her notes despite all resolve. Emily did not do this, she thought... By now she had lost all pretence of living a normal life. She couldn't remember the last time she had been out, or even if she had any existence of consequence left... (222)

I am a graduate and teacher of English literature, so the idea of living through the story is as precise as the movies Dove sees at university. It is as vital as Dove's dream of Emily Brontë, which signals the ties between authors and their creations:

Emily raised it to her chest and held it there for a moment with her eyes closed and, in a slow and gentle manner, in contrast to her frenzied digging, laid the precious thing in the hole she had made. Then she looked around, as if expecting there might be a witness, though who might possibly appear on this bleak early morning in late autumn, Dove could not imagine. (102)

The novel plays with the idea of the writer and the work as intertwined, as shadows and doppelgangers, in more or less explicit ways. Ellis is Dove's creation, as Ellis Bell was Emily Brontë's pseudonym. Dove is a type, literally and figuratively, as the epigraph and chapter headings reveal. Dove's adoptive mother is Jane, and Ellis's story includes the Shaws, Cliff, Katherine, and Nell. The specificity of the moors replaced by inner-west Sydney in its various incarnations—daggy 1960s, edgy 1990s, too-hip 2014. Dove is Emily, the writer overtaken by story in her damp room. Death and absence are constant presences, both menacing and welcome.

The book seems circular, the multiple meanings of creation meeting each other. It begins in a way that seems not to be fiction, and ends in a way that makes it impossible to know whether it is fiction or not. Except, of course, it's all fiction, and the delights of Dove and Ellis's dovetailed story is that it is unnecessary to know, precisely, what is "true". The story doubles and loops—Dove created Ellis, Emily created Ellis who created *Wuthering Heights*, Adelaide created Dove, Emily inspired Adelaide who made Emily also inspire Dove. Writers and their fictions talk to each other, across continents and generations. Their absence speaks, too—Ellis's mother is missing, as Emily's was, as Dove's real mother is, as Emily is from Australia. This book is about the inspirational absence, a gap that demands to be filled, the absence meaning Emily, Adelaide, Dove, and Ellis must create in order to fill it.

This space is then filled with words, and necessarily, the strong words of strong women. Whether they are university professors or former governesses or editors, it is the women who teach other women within and without the novel. Ellis makes difficult choices in order to have a career, the history of late 20th century feminism in Australia in her actions. Dove lives the Newtown life, working in a creative field without joy or success, until she "discovers" Ellis. Emily seemed to live a life without choice, and Adelaide—I'm tempted to walk from my Redfern flat, to the towers of UTS, to ask.

Emily Brontë has written this novel especially for her... But for whom had Dove written her story? Apart from herself.
(290)

If *Wuthering Heights* was written directly for Dove, then *The Women's Pages* seems to have been written for someone like me. A woman, a creative writing graduate, who lives in Sydney's inner west and lives through her words. The review copy was handed to me, and the opening sentences soothed me with their skillful cadences, the unspoken passion beneath making me turn the pages again and again. Pages, women's pages, women's words—the story loops over and around my life, my copy of *Wuthering Heights*, and I loved it.