

WOMEN OF A CERTAIN RAGE

Life stories introduced by
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Introduction – Liz Byrski

Let us go forth with fear and courage and rage to save the world.
– Grace Paley¹

Welcome to this collection of women's personal stories and essays about their rage. This is a book that would not have been published in my mother's youth, and probably not in my own, before the emergence of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s. Indeed, there are still many people and organisations that believe that women's anger is abhorrent. Public demonstrations of rage by women are still frequently portrayed as shocking by commentators, politicians and many media outlets: think Serena Williams' outburst of rage at the umpire in the 2018 US Open. Williams was vilified by commentators, columnists and widespread audiences of viewers who have, for decades, allowed male players to get away with similar, and often far worse, displays of rage, dismissing them with humour or with a shrug and a rueful smile: think John McEnroe, among others.

My favourite example of a woman expressing her rage not only in public but in the Australian Parliament is that of then prime minister Julia Gillard's 2012 attack on then opposition leader Tony Abbott. Gillard's powerful, articulate and finely tuned rage at Abbott's misogyny left Parliament and the country gasping. Today, that speech is remembered around the world, and to date it has had over 3.3 million views on YouTube. Even so, women's anger still attracts widespread and often vicious

condemnation, while manifestations of men's anger so often pass without comment. Speaking out is powerful, but for many women it is still a terrifying prospect because retribution can take many forms.

#MeToo had already become an international voice for women on the impact of misogyny and sexism when publisher Georgia Richter and I sent out invitations to possible contributors to this book. #MeToo is a powerful recognition of the cruel and ruthless abuse of women, and it appears to be the platform from which many offenders will eventually be brought to justice. Sharing their rage has helped women to feel believed, understood and supported, as well as able to recognise themselves as part of a narrative that is bigger than any individual.

Georgia and I explained in our invitation that we would like to explore some of the other issues that can inspire and ignite women's rage. We had no idea what to expect, and received a number of immediate responses from some women telling us that they did not feel not angry enough to contribute. That, of course, was fine – and indicated that some of the women on our list had come to terms with those things that raised their ire, or at least they had no need or desire to express it on paper.

What we learned, as we waited for submissions from those who *were* energised by the prospect of expressing their rage in this way, was that many of the contributors – often writers by vocation – were truly struggling with the subject matter.

It transpires that it is one thing to feel rage, and quite another to articulate it, not least because writing it down can lead to experiencing the rage all over again. As the submissions arrived, Georgia and I devoured them with growing excitement at the diversity of the topics, and the power and eloquence of the writing. We compared notes on the way in which each story affected us. We shed tears, we laughed out loud, and we learned so much

from these very personal and often deeply moving stories.

The women who have contributed to this book come from widely differing backgrounds, races, beliefs and identities. They range in age from their twenties to their eighties, and they write with passion, courage, humour and with, and of, their rage. There are writers here – poets, novelists, essayists, playwrights and journalists – as well as women in the public service, academics, teachers, medical professionals, activists and professionals from film and television. They are Australian mothers, daughters, granddaughters and wives. They write with empathy, wisdom and despair about their rage, and with power about their attempts to turn their anger into action, and about learning how to live with it.

This book begins and ends with two proudly self-styled ‘cranky’ women. In her piece ‘A Door, Opening’, a cranky Victoria Midwinter Pitt suggests that ‘Anger is a state of opposition. It is not merely intellectual, or philosophical. It’s personal. It is the direct, visceral, spiritual experience of being at odds with something.’

Hers is a definition that encapsulates the stories in this book, speaking to the range of powerful, moving, sometimes heartbreaking and often funny pieces.

Goldie Goldbloom, in ‘To the Max’, writes of the blatantly cruel neglect of an elderly relative, while in ‘Seen and Not Heard’, Meg McKinlay tells of the way in which a character in a childhood book became her model of anger and continues to inspire her writing.

There are fathers here: emotionally absent ones, and those whose presence casts a frightening shadow. And there is laughter too: Julianne van Loon takes the wisdom of Seneca, her most admired philosopher, and tests its value against the realities of

life as a working mother. And Carrie Cox wonders resignedly why rage never runs on time.

Women's determination is apparent in Olivia Muscat's 'To Scream or Not to Scream', in which her rage is not against her blindness but at the patronising and diminishing responses to it. And in 'Vicarious Trauma', Carly Findlay expresses her horror at the level of oversharing and ableism by parents and others as they expose the lives of their disabled babies and children on social and public media.

Many pieces rage at the things we cannot control, and then offer up responses as to how we can. In her essay 'The Thief', Nandi Chinna writes of the single event that dramatically changed her life, and how she has learned to live with its shadow. Professor Fiona Stanley (on the Australian government's response to the Uluru Statement), René Pettitt-Schipp (on immigration detention) and Margo Kingston (on climate change) offer models of activism as a means of responding to government positions that feel morally untenable. Jane Underwood tries and fails and tries again to be zen about social injustice when it comes very close to home.

All this and so much more is contained here in the stories of twenty women who took up the challenge of revealing and interrogating the meaning of rage. As Fiona Stanley asks in her opening statement: 'is rage pointless (and maybe harmful to our own health) or are there ways of raging "productively"?'

Reading these pieces is one way of finding out.

I began this introduction by noting the emergence of second-wave feminism, which I remember as a hugely positive time of my life. It was a time in which I learned about politics and about women, their anger and their power to create change. It was a time of extraordinary hope and inspiration, in which the

friendship of women, and their ability to stand and work fearlessly together, was obvious to us as activists. Many real societal improvements were achieved during this time; awareness and understanding and support around the issues that mattered to us grew. There were improvements and increasing opportunities in areas of medicine, the law, education, training and the workplace. And greater attention was drawn to violence against women at home, in the workplace and in public places. I recall a strong sense of togetherness and purpose through the 1970s, along with enormous satisfaction when the work eventually delivered results: breast cancer screening, abortion law reform, the slow dissolution of discrimination against women in employment, in government and union careers, in the law and the police force – and so much more.

But there is still a very long way to go in these and in so many other areas. In the '80s, as feminism was driving widespread change, neoliberalism crept in like a thief in the night, taking feminist values, ideas and agendas, and commandeering them to its own ends. Feminism, originally a radical countercultural movement, was distorted into a tool of neoliberalism. Feminist goals were used to sell us everything from mascara (because we're worth it), to paralytically expensive handbags and cars, restrictive corsets and cosmetic surgery (because we deserve it). Women's connections with each other were overrun by the marketplace: the issues and the goals of feminism have been translated into slogans to sell us products and services that we are persuaded we need.

In her powerful closing essay, our second self-professed 'cranky' woman, writer, academic and activist Eva Cox, explains the impact of this pivotal change and what it means for the future. She explains the alienating influence of politics and the marketplace, and their impact on women and their sense of a

sisterhood. She asks us to rethink what we can do to create a safer, stronger, fairer and more just country for ourselves, our families and friends, and especially for our daughters. Like many of the other women in this book, through their words and deeds, Eva Cox urges us to get on with it, to act, and to do so with the energy and power of our individual and collective rage.

Women of a Certain Rage goes to print in a time of enormous upheaval and undoings. It is not long after the cataclysmic bushfires in the summer of 2020 and still at the height of the COVID-19 crisis. Might this have been a different book had it been published a couple of years on from the pandemic? We can't know. What we *do* know already is that women around the world have responded to the virus in different ways, with different experiences, making a range of contributions, especially in the areas of healthcare, child and aged care, community support care, and so much more.

There are a number of significant issues that authorities have noted in their planning around lockdowns. These include the possibility of increasing levels of domestic violence, and of women losing their jobs and becoming homeless and sick while caring for young children. Many of the stories in this book draw attention to basic issues of discrimination against women: those issues are more crucial than ever at a time when our country and others around the world are living through the pandemic crisis. Hardest hit will be the elderly, but also those in violent and deprived situations with limited resources. Will women and their children pay the highest price, or does COVID-19 have the potential to flatten the curve of discrimination through a better, more generous, kinder world in which we are all more open and more willing to walk alongside each other in equality? Writers

will, eventually, tell the coronavirus story. Let's hope that future readers will discover the story of a brand new day of fairness, kindness, equality and love that brings out the best in all of us.

In the meantime, wherever you are reading this, if these stories speak to you, we urge you to share your stories of rage too, and to take the advice of the late, great poet Grace Paley – to go forth together, with our fear, our courage and our rage to save the world.

A Door, Opening—Victoria Midwinter Pitt

Ah, anger. I know a bit about that.

Where do I start?

And more pressingly – where do I finish?

Most women are taught to contain our anger. Getting angry gets you nowhere. Something wrong, something dangerous about getting angry. Best not.

I've spent a lot of my life being angry and a lot of my life trying not to be angry.

I've got all sorts of angry.

All sorts of things make me angry. Bonsai makes me angry. Quiet people make me angry. The chaise bit in 'chaise lounges'* makes me angry.

I have no business being angry about these things. I know this.

And I have world-rage: why, when we are heading over the cliff edge, is the human race being led by such an incompetent and corrupt generation of leaders? Why are such men still in charge? Why are *men* still in charge?

* Yes, lounges, not longues. Chaise longues do not make me angry.

And I have a personal anger. Some of it deeply felt. Some of it apparently random.

I spent a lot of my forties, and I mean a lot, having loud arguments with strangers. With people in shops, in cinemas, in restaurants, in traffic.

It made me mad how mad I got.

One day, I went to see my then shrink, a wise-cracking, hard truth-telling Californian. Jesse, I said, there's something really wrong with me. I'm so cranky all the time. Hoping she would correct me: Victoria, don't be so hard on yourself, you're not cranky all the time.

That's not what she said. She said: Yes.

Then she said: Repeat after me: I'm cranky.

Me: Oh Jesse, come on.

Jesse: Repeat after me! I'm cranky.

Silence. She could fuck off, frankly.

Jesse: REPEAT AFTER ME! I'M CRANKY.

Silence. But the clock was ticking and I had stuff I needed to talk through.

Me (muttered): I'm cranky.

Jesse: I like being cranky!

Me (through gritted teeth): I like being cranky.

Jesse: It's *good* to be cranky!

Me (all right, fuck it): It's good to be cranky!

Jesse: I wanna be CRANKIER!!

Me (click, bang, boom – revelation!): I WANNA BE CRANKIER!!

And that was enough for today. I was ready to go home now.

This is arguably (hah!) the closest I've come to being good with my anger.

Years of thinking and working on my anger have yet to make me fully understand it, or feel comfortable with it, or exhaust its mysterious sources.

The only thing that has really helped has been discovering that I'm not alone.

All around me, like a miracle, through the currents and countercurrents of the era of #MeToo and #TimesUp, I hear the scratchy sounds of other women, making their confessions through gritted teeth – *I'm cranky*.

It's a good start.

But it's only a start. I don't think that anyone in this age and this culture really understands the rage of women. Because we have not seen nearly enough of it out in the daylight to properly study it, or respect it.

Not yet.

When I was eighteen, I was shocked to discover that almost overnight and out of nowhere, I was developing a very bad temper.

Just short of violent. Just.

Throwing things, breaking things, screaming.

So explosive that, on some occasions, I would literally go blind with rage.

I sought help. I expected, I *wanted*, to be subjected to a punishing workshop on the damage my anger was inflicting on those I turned it on. I counted on being shamed into changing.

The quietly spoken psychologist who took on my case did something far more confronting: she listened to my long confession without interruption and finally asked just one, devastating question:

Why are you angry?

I've spent my life listening to other people's stories. In my work making documentary films and verbatim theatre, I've had the rare privilege of spending thousands of hours with hundreds of very different women, as they recounted their experience of acute events – fighting back the plague of HIV/AIDS, surviving a terrorist attack, coming on a leaky boat to seek refuge in Australia only to be consigned to a Pacific island prison, enduring the war the West waged in Afghanistan.

I have seen again and again – as I saw in myself that morning in my genius psychologist's office – that it is a profoundly vulnerable and powerful thing for a woman to speak her anger clearly.

Our anger is enormous. Its sources run to the deepest foundations of the worlds we live in – producing unrelenting burdens,

constrictions and dangers we have no choice but to map our way through.

We recognise those forces, those structures; we navigate them. But that doesn't mean we accept them.

We carry a lot of anger. A lot.

When we express it, what we do is to break the bargain that 'this is how things are' – we make invisible things visible. This is an essential condition of changing them.

TWO MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD ANGER

My favourite picture from my childhood is a twin – one of two photographs taken seconds apart on the verandah of our family home in the Perth Hills when I was three years old. In the first, I am sitting on my tricycle as Dundee, the family cat, accepts the homage of the sun like a prince. But he reclines on brick, while I sit astride a three-wheeled throne: I am the queen. Together, we regard the camera mildly.

A split second later my father calls in my sisters. Dundee hightails it for the trees as middle sister and big sister crowd around.

On command, my older sisters smile sweetly. Snap. The year is 1971, an era when cameras are loaded with film, not digital memory. We will not see until the developed photographs return from the chemist that the portrait in sororal contentment is wrecked for all posterity by the three-year-old girl at its centre, scowling so blackly, so tightly, it looks like I've swallowed a storm. The lines around my screwed-up eyes point precisely to where my sisters have their hands on my tricycle.

Of these two pictures, one is the favourite image of my childhood – which? Hands-down, the one of the enraged three year old.

Another afternoon in those timeless, shapeless years.

I am standing about halfway up the stairs, while at the foot of the stairs, my father is telling me off. He wags his finger at me and raises his voice.

I put my fingers in my ears and shake my head. I chant, loud and clear, so I can hear myself: *No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No.*

Daddy turns purple.

These are my earliest memories of anger, and they are both quite mysterious to me – wonderfully vivid to my senses, but in their *sense*, a bit mad, a bit out of joint with the basic laws of the universe I think I grew up in.

For years, that twin photograph sat largely unremarked in the family photo album – drawing nothing more than a gentle chuckle. I can't take my eyes off it. For me, this picture isn't cute: it's anthropology, a rare record of an alternative truth beneath our family culture. Rage was not indulged in my sisters and I. We were taught to control our anger, not display it.

But here it is, unfiltered, undisguised, full-frontal.

That staircase confrontation with my father is a beautiful puzzle too. The most acute part of this memory, the most visceral part, is the feeling Daddy's face turning purple produced in me: it was *exhilarating* to make Daddy turn purple.

The puzzle is that in the years to come, Daddy's temper would not make any of us feel enlivened. It would trigger a powering down, a battening down. We'd wait it out, holding our breaths.

Trying to hold our tongues.

My father was and is a beautiful man and a very loving father, very engaged, very encouraging, a lot of fun.

And he has a terrible temper. He's a shouter. He bellows. It doesn't scare me any more, because there came a time, as an adult woman, I just filled my lungs and shouted back, and it turns out I'm louder than him and I can and will shout for longer.

But when I was little, and through my adolescence, there was no contest. To be crystal clear, he never used physical violence against us, *never*, and this is something every woman in the world should be able to say – that our fathers have never laid a hand on us in anger.

But as a little person, my father's anger was difficult to live with. He never hit us, but the volume and force of his shouting had a physical effect: my body would tense up, on reflex, as though I was about to be hit. I was terrified.

He was not the only person in the family who got angry; sometimes my mother would get angry too, with us, or with him. But my father had the lion's share of the shouting. None of us wanted to make him angry. And some semi-conscious part of me assumed it was his capacity for anger that put him at the head of the family.

This made sense. As a child, everywhere I looked – other families we knew, the fictional families we saw on television or in the movies, the real world as it was shown on the news – women made way for men. I cannot remember ever putting it into words, but I remember feeling it keenly. I understood the reality of this, but I never accepted it. It made me restless and edgy. Actually, it made me angry. But this being the way that things were, so

universal as to be invisible, it was as though there was no-one and nothing to be angry with, nowhere to put this anger.

So it settled, inside me.

Rage against other necessarily invisible forces soon joined it.

When I was six years old, I was wrestling with another girl after school. We fell on the sofa in a tangle of legs, and I had a kind of minigasm. I did not have a word for it then, but what I had just discovered was Sex, and in my specific case, Gay Sex. In the next half of the same nanosecond, I remember looking wildly around to see if anyone else had seen, because even then I knew: little girls were not meant to feel like that about other little girls.

How did I know that at six? Who could count all the fragments of information we absorb on these matters – the words, the looks, the jokes?

What I do know is that from moment I grew up furiously hiding it, from the world and from myself.

Then when I was fifteen I fell in love, the kind of raging, passionate, I-would-die-for-this love that belongs only to fifteen year olds.

Nothing I did could contain it.

Rumours bloomed across the school. So at fifteen I had the very clarifying experience of participating in a witch-hunt, in which unfortunately I was assigned the part of the witch.

Looking back now, I'm amazed I didn't spontaneously combust. It was outrageously inflammatory to experience the sweet, wild

feeling of love for the first time, and simultaneously and with equal force, to feel disgusting and dangerous.

There was shame and fear in that mix, and beneath those two was something stronger: I was enraged to be so wrong.

I was enraged to find people I loved looking at me with disgust, to find friends, lots of them, simply stop talking to me.

This was an era when consenting adult men were still sent to prison under Western Australia's sodomy laws, when only a few years before, gay people, gay children, were sent to respectable medical practitioners for shock therapy, to reverse their perversion.

As speculation grew around us, I was followed, I was harassed, I was threatened with expulsion from school, I feared for the interventions I would be subjected to, to cure me.

I ducked and wove.

I fought for my life. I lied, for my life. There was no substance to these rumours: I was straight; we were just friends.

All the peace of the good, long life I have lived since I came out of the closet, all the apologies and reconciliations that have healed everything else, will never fully heal the indignity of having to lie. Changing nothing of the substance of either who I truly was or how outrageous it was to be condemned for it, merely keeping all of this invisible. Swallowing the storm.

Nowhere to put it, but down.

I snuffed out my love. I found my way back into the centre of school life.

Then in the years after I left school and left home, as well as being funny, smart, cracking company, a great listener and a good friend, I suddenly became the possessor of a very, very black temper. Worse than anything I'd seen from my father: wilder, more personal.

Every time, when my rage finally subsided, I would feel the same: lost. Like I'd climbed onto a bus when I was drunk and here I was stumbling off, sobering up. How did I get here? How do I get back?

Anger gets you nowhere ...

But why are you angry? asked my brave and thoughtful psychologist.

Where do I start? How will I finish?

Just start, she said.

A year of stuttering, sometimes circular talking later, and with one last, crucial push, I came out of the closet.

Around this time, and not coincidentally, my long career working in first-hand storytelling began.

Now it was my job not to talk, but to listen. Julie Bates, AO, told me the story of being a sex worker on the streets of Sydney in the 1980s, when HIV/AIDS first emerged. Amid the early panic, the stigma she had always endured as a sex worker hit a new pitch of loathing and threats. But Julie and the women she worked with refused to accept any more blame and shame: in the eye of the storm, they enforced condom use throughout their industry, and pioneered one of the most successful safe-sex strategies in the world. They went on to finally win the long

struggle to overturn the criminal laws against sex work in New South Wales.

I listened to Meltem Muezzinoglu, a Turkish woman taken hostage at the Oberoi Hotel during the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, who was forced to accompany the terrorists on their murderous rampage. She told of the moment when, after eight hours of watching them hunt and execute innocent strangers, the terrorists finally stopped in an empty room for a rest and then left, leaving Meltem and her husband behind. Minutes later, the terrorists were back, pounding at the door: *Open up, we've left our backpacks*. Those bags were packed with explosives. Meltem refused to open the door. This was the first and only chance to oppose them, she said, and I took it.

I went looking for the story behind the 'Children Overboard' scandal of 2001, and I found my way to a young Iraqi refugee named Zaynab Hassan, who told me how she had boarded a leaky boat for Australia that year with her mother and brother, but out on the ocean, their boat sank. They were rescued by the Australian Navy and sent to Nauru. Later, attempting to justify its policy of turnbacks and detention, the Australian government would falsely claim that parents had thrown their children overboard from that boat, producing photographs of children in the water as 'proof'. Many among her family and friends advised her not to speak out or make trouble, because she had far too much to lose, but Zaynab told her story: *That's me and my little brother in that picture. Nobody threw us overboard. That's a picture of a rescue from when we sank*.

I understood these stories. What had finally tipped me from the closet wasn't an act of loving acceptance; it was one last stroke of anger. A woman I'd been with in deep secrecy, later struggling

with her own shame, turned on me: what she said was the worst homophobia I've ever heard, the cruellest thing anyone has said to me. And it is one of the greatest gifts anyone has given me. She had fully and precisely named what I'd been fighting since I was six and slammed it on the table where finally I had no choice but to look at it and make a choice. Did I agree? And at last, out came the truth: no, I don't believe that, and I never have. How did I finally know that? I was *outraged*. This was the first nanosecond of my coming out.

The wider storms I'd swallowed since my childhood, I'm still spitting back out.

In 2019 I had the epic privilege of writing and directing a theatre piece called *I'm with Her*. The original brief the producers put to me was to create a show based on conversations with Australian women reflecting on their experiences in the era of #MeToo and #TimesUp. I had a bit of an itch about this proposition and asked for a night to sleep on it. When I woke up, I knew what I wanted to add. In hearing those stories, I wanted to go looking for the golden thread I'd rarely seen pulled – the resistance, the opposition women mount and have always mounted to this shit. At one level or another, even if it's resting in absolute stillness inside absolute silence, nobody cops that stuff without in some way opposing it.

I wanted to ask other women to take me inside their skin and show me the version they have lived of that.

The women I worked with ranged from a sex worker to a nun, from a former prime minister to a professional footballer, from a bartender in her twenties to a botanist in her nineties – all of them very different women living very different lives but, at bottom, the story they told was the same.

They described not just outrageous exclusion, discrimination, harassment and abuse but how that treatment had blended seamlessly into the social landscape they grew up in. The logic they hit again and again was *That's just the way it is*.

As though fish were complaining about water.

From her infancy, the nun understood the Bible made it clear that only men could be priests; later she studied theology and came to see that women had been simply written out of the Bible. As a young woman, the botanist wanted to study veterinary science but was told women could not be admitted. Why not? The dean's reply showed the vacuum of sense in such a policy: 'How would *you* throw an elephant?'

That's not water. That's the handiwork of a bunch of other fish.

Each woman's story turned on anger, on seeing clearly that the 'way it is' was actually composed of choices and actions.

If that's the way it is, says the politician and counterterrorism expert Anne Aly near the end of the show, then the way it is needs to change.

I still struggle with my anger. I don't lose control in the way I did when I was twenty, but I feel more anger, more often than I would wish to.

I don't wholly understand it, or wholly trust it. But I no longer simply distrust it. I'm willing to ask the question: why am I angry?

I don't expect ever to be cured of my anger; I expect anger will circle me, and I it, for the rest of my life, like a book that demands to be re-read – same story, but each reading revealing something new.

And this I know for sure: that old truism that anger gets you nowhere is a sly trick, played to induce stasis. Anger is not a destination, it's true. But anger is a door, opening.

Anger is a state of opposition.

It is not merely intellectual, or philosophical. It's personal.

It is the direct, visceral, spiritual experience of being at odds with something. Something is wrong as far as I'm concerned, I don't like this, I'm not happy about this.

Anger is a piece of fire, a bit of fuel igniting this knowledge and the change it marks. Anger separates me from this thing, an essential condition to changing it

There is so much – *so much* – that we would separate from and change.

Most women are taught to contain our anger. Contain it. Not resolve it, or assuage it – contain it. Well, that which I contain is stored. We are walking fuel stocks.

Repeat after me: I'm Cranky. It's good to be Cranky. I want to be CRANKIER.