

Kate Ryan on *My Accidental Career* by Brenda Niall

First of all I would also like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people on whose land we gather and to pay tribute to their elders, past, present and emerging. This land is unceded. It was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

I am so pleased and honoured to be here to launch Brenda Niall's fascinating memoir *My Accidental Career*. Some people will be aware that I am Brenda's niece, and my relationship with her as my mother Philippa's sister has been central to my life. Brenda has been a generous, funny, interesting and interested aunt. But apart from that – though imagining that is difficult because I cannot imagine my life without Brenda in it – she has been an inspiration for me as a feminist, as a professional person and, above all, as a writer. I remember someone asking me whether, in my family, lesser things were expected of me and my sisters, compared with my brothers in terms of career. Without hesitation I said no.

I expected to have a university degree, to make my own living and to do as well as my brothers. This expectation – that women's careers are as important as men's – even in the 1980s when I was a teenager was still, sadly, not the norm. But Brenda's example made it clear to me that a satisfying career was both possible and vital.

*My Accidental Career* reflects on many aspects of Brenda's career as well as displaying her characteristic wit, verve and delicacy of touch.

As Chris Gordon notes in the *Readings* monthly Brenda is considered one of Australia's finest biographers and *My Accidental Career* explores just how she became this. She has also worked variously as an academic, literary critic, book reviewer, and perhaps surprisingly – given in the book Brenda confesses to not being much of a fine diner – a sometime contributor to *the Age* Good Food Guide. She has been awarded an Order of Australia, an Honorary Doctorate of Letters – and in 1990 she was invited to be a member of the

prestigious Australian Academy for the Humanities. The English section of the Award had, until that point, elected only one woman, Dame Leonie Kramer, in – *wait for it* – 1969.

Brenda has won a dazzling number of awards for her writing including the National Biography Award, the Victorian Premier's Prize for Literature, the Queensland Premier's Literary Award, the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal – as well as countless shortlistings in other major prizes, including the Melbourne Prize for Literature.

Born in 1930, at a time when girls were expected only to get married and have children, with work a brief, occasionally pleasant interlude to be abandoned upon marriage, Brenda's career has been exceptional.

Of course, her amazing facility with words was there from the beginning. An asthmatic child at a time when asthma could be fatal, she was kept at home and indoors more than her siblings and spent time with her mother, Connie, absorbing her stories. She also, phenomenally – and this was surely a sign of what was to come – taught herself to read at the age of three.

At school, taught by the nuns of the FCJ order at Genazzano Convent, in Kew, Brenda describes herself as doing well but not being particularly ambitious. However, in her last year at school she also observed and was annoyed by the nuns' ethos of not rewarding, indeed actively discouraging, achievement. Brenda was allowed only one prize, despite coming first in both English and French. She had won the English prize the year before and one prize was considered enough.

As Brenda notes wryly the nuns had 'no problem with failing their students; they did it all the time. It was success that troubled them'.

Moving on to the University of Melbourne, where she was a rising star, Brenda's final year was derailed when her father Frank died of a brain tumour in 1952 at only fifty-three. In

a poignant section at St Vincent's Hospital, the family waited. Unnoticed and unaccompanied, Brenda left his bedside and walked alone to her graduation ceremony where she suffered a panic attack. Her father died a few days later.

Returning to university after a week or so, friends were beginning to consider moving onto futures at Oxford and the Sorbonne, futures that could have been hers. But Brenda's planned thesis no longer seemed tenable or important in the face of the family's grief. The effect of this deep loss, however, was just one event of many about which Brenda writes in *My Accidental Career*. It caused her to move in a different direction, but due to her – outstanding abilities as a scholar did not hold back her career in any permanent way. In fact, a few years later, her MA thesis on Edith Wharton received first class honours.

Taking a sidestep for a moment, a lot has been said about Brenda and her writing but perhaps not enough about how funny she is. *My Accidental Career* includes excerpts from Brenda's diaries from an overseas trip to Ireland in 1958 and reveal her delight in the absurd, the ironic. Kept in bed with a cold, she is visited by a series of maids, doctors, priests and her cousin Lilla and her husband Joseph. These sections of the book have none of the static quality of a diary but rather the feel of a very funny play in which a series of characters make their entrances and departures, as if on stage, with all their odd comic humanity:

The housekeeper, Hannah, tells me that the shoemaker and the pastry cook are both Nialls and she wants me to go and see them. She says also that I put her in mind of a lovely girl called Mary Quinn who had a grand education and couldn't get a job – we have the same way of speaking...Hannah staggers up with my trays, then sits on the bed for a good chat about politics and my diet. 'Mrs Kylie's bread never sits on your chest,' she says. 'Have some more of it.'

Brenda recalls Hannah's pithy putdown of an English couple who bemoan the poverty of the area while admiring the landscape: 'Well you left it so... The English took all we had but they couldn't move the scenery.'

What strikes me here is Brenda's acute ear for voice and detail, her comic timing, her recognition of the eccentricities of character, her delight in those who puncture pomposity and her quiet anti-authoritarianism.

These qualities you might call *novelistic*, except that Brenda has never sought to be a novelist. She took that novelistic eye to biography because she saw light, colour and unpredictability in the stories of real people.

In an interview with a Balmain bookshop Brenda likens the rules of classic French theatre to the art of biography: 'Don't put a chair on the stage unless someone is going to sit on it.' The memoir reveals again and again her eye for the *telling*, carefully chosen, rather than merely decorative detail, and in the course of her career she took this skill to biographical subjects as diverse as the artist Judy Cassab, the extraordinary Boyd family of artists and writers, children's writers Ethel Turner and Mary Grant Bruce, colonial artist Georgiana McCrae, her grandmother Agnes Maguire Gorman and an obscure Jesuit priest called William Hackett – among others. I found it particularly fascinating how one book led to another, how interests were pursued and built upon.

What unites her approach to her subjects, is her democratic *interest* in them *as people*, her desire to know how they tick and to understand how they came to be what they were. Even her abortive early attempt to interview the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, at ninety-four, a towering divisive figure in sectarian Melbourne, displays a desire to see beyond the public persona.

Arriving for the interview Brenda notes with exquisite detail Mannix putting her through what you could call *ordeal by tea ceremony*:

‘Why ring for tea? The housekeeper brought it in: a perfectly polished silver tray, fine china, shining teapot, milk jug, lump sugar, silver tongs. She poured a cup for me, but with an imperceptible signal from the archbishop, she left the second cup empty and withdrew. Mannix said nothing. He sat quietly in his high-backed chair...’

What is clear in this passage, and in this encounter, is Brenda’s heightened awareness of what might be below the surface of things, Mannix’s not sharing the tea – his silence. A biographical subject who does not give of himself willingly, under Brenda’s intelligent gaze, reveals himself nonetheless.

Some years later during her time as a visiting scholar at Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan she learns of the death of Martin Luther King. She also goes to a lecture by the African American writer Ralph Ellison and notes in her diary that ‘Ellison was asked why he didn’t do more in the civil rights movement. He got angry – understandably – at being taken to task by middle-class white students, and said he had no more and no less responsibility as an American than they did. “I am angry as I can be, and yet I live in this world that is my America as well as yours.”’

Again Brenda reveals herself as not only a discerning observer but someone who knows hypocrisy when she sees it, noting in her diary that ‘she sees no black students in Ann Arbor. It is too expensive of course.’

One of many diverting episodes in the book include Brenda’s period as a research assistant for the polarising Catholic anti-communist Bob Santamaria. I enjoyed reading about her somewhat haphazard methods of taking a turn on the switchboard, a task which the men in the office were never expected to do. To sum up, when Brenda *said* she was putting people through, basically *she hung up on them*.

Of course, possibly a lack of technical ability may have contributed. However, in an office starkly divided along gender lines, with the women mostly typing and doing the washing up while the men did the *proper* work, I read a degree of chutzpah in this action. I had the sense that Brenda would, in her time, be doing a lot more than working on the switchboard. I also infer a hint of refusal to be ground down by the prevailing ethos for young women. And indeed that was the case.

It is wonderful then, though at times painful – due to the current starvation and devaluation of the humanities in Australian universities today – to read about Brenda’s rich years in the Monash University English department under Professor Bill Scott. Monash was, as Brenda describes it ‘new and untried, on a charmless campus in the outer suburbs’, but she chose it despite offers from ANU and the University of Melbourne in 1964.

At Monash, as elsewhere in Australia at this time, the arts were thriving and there was energy for change and innovation, for new blood. Here, Brenda’s skills were immediately valued, and she carved her career as a highly respected academic, meeting colleagues and students who became her friends for life.

Brenda’s closeness to her family and friends is a key aspect of this book. Her close relationship with academic and editor Grahame Johnston was central. His belief in her gifts gave her confidence and he charted a course for her in academia until, in echoes of her father’s early death, he died at only forty-seven. Living in different cities, a significant part of their relationship were the rich letters they had exchanged. It was after Grahame’s death that Brenda began writing her book *Seven Little Billabongs*, in part perhaps to fill the grief she felt and the loss of the connection they shared through words.

*My Accidental Career* explores the many deep and lasting friendships Brenda built in her working life (friendships aren’t talked about enough in books, I think, perhaps most of all the importance of women’s friendships) and Brenda shows how central they are to a life. This

book is an account, too, of how work should enrich a life, rather than detract from it. Her descriptions of the collegiate dinner parties, lunches, the shared successes and failures of life – marriages, divorces, ambitions – the jokes and camaraderie – not to mention the odd soporific departmental meeting, in which a colleague, rather than attending to proceedings, was writing an imagist poem about toes – show how just how important work can be.

What stood out for me in this book was her courage. When opportunities came along, in a time when intelligent women were not encouraged or expected to succeed, Brenda took up the challenges offered. Her courage in tackling – in her own quiet persistent way – research trips, interviews, the hierarchies of American academia, recalcitrant publishers who failed to have enough books for launches or almost failed to enter her book in prizes (one of which she went on to win) and take breakfast calls from Gough Whitlam (I'll leave that highly amusing anecdote for you to find in the book) are just some of the many ways she displays this courage.

She also shows a refreshing belief in her own intellectual capacities, which existed alongside a certain shyness. An early fear of public speaking, meaning that she tutored and supervised theses for many years but avoided lecturing, was overcome when she was invited to deliver the inaugural Seymour lecture in 2005. This award specifically for biography, would alternate lectures by practising Australian biographers with esteemed biographers from the UK and the US and when it came to Australian biographers Brenda was the unquestionable first choice.

Her lecture on the art of biography was held in Canberra at the National Library and repeated at the universities of Adelaide and Western Australia. In Brenda's words, despite her initial trepidation, it did not 'flop'.

In fact, as with so many other things Brenda has set her mind to, it was an outstanding success.

I think Brenda will be happy to say she is ninety-one and already, I believe, contemplating a new book. As she says herself, ‘Writers don’t have to stop.’ Her interest in friendship, in family, in ideas and in the world around her continues.

Above all, *My Accidental Career* displays her interest *in people* and how they work. As she says of her father, Frank, who, as a cardiologist, was alert to the particular rhythms of the human heart and its irregularities, and her mother Connie, an acute observer of people, Brenda has never stopped *asking why* – even when, as she says, the subject is herself.

Brenda’s book shows us how lucky we are, as readers, that she never has stopped asking why. She has built not so much an accidental career, though in its circuitous, sometimes serendipitous path, it has been that, but a *brilliant* career.

I am thrilled to launch Brenda’s book *My Accidental Career*.