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Foreword

A while ago I gave a talk to a room brimming with people. The topic was modern family life and an overview of women's lives today. When I had finished my talk and called for questions, one man stood up at the back of the room and in a booming voice shouted, 'Mate, you're generalising.'

The truth is, that is a pretty accurate description of my job. To listen to many voices, hear their thoughts and opinions and then sieve through all I have heard to unravel what were common opinions and what were more divisive ones and by whom. I just needed to find a way of telling him this without sounding facetious.

There is a quote attributed to either writer Anais Nin or Rabbi Shemuel ben Nachmani (don't worry, I also frequently confuse the two): 'We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.' It's actually quite difficult to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. Following a similar talk to a large media organisation heavily invested in a female audience, a question came from the most senior executive in the room. He opened with: 'My wife isn't like that at all', and insisted I had not spoken of average women in my research. I had to explain to him that his wife is not a good representative of Australian women, seeing she lives in a seven-bedroom house, has plenty of household help and skis in Aspen every year. On that occasion I may have been trying to sound facetious.

Our internal bias is powerful and comes into play each and every day. Based on looks, mannerisms and style, we make instant

decisions about people according to our own life experience.

My own cathartic moment of not judging people happened at eighteen, when I was a volunteer on a kibbutz. I was just settling into my shared room when a thin young man with a shaved head and covered in tattoos head-to-toe walked in. My upbringing in one of Sydney's leafy and somewhat dullish suburbs led me to instantly think 'danger' and 'skin head'. Then, with a soft voice, almost a whisper, and a broad smile, he put his hand out to shake mine and said, 'I'm Tommy, nice to meet you.' Tommy was a very sweet man, friendly to everyone and well liked. He just took his obsession with ska music a bit far for social convention.

A somewhat opposite experience took place in the Long Bay Correctional Complex where I met Darren, a withdrawn young man close to release following his manslaughter sentence. When he entered the small room, he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt buttoned up to the neck. For our next meeting the following week he wore a T-shirt revealing a body covered in tattoos. Suddenly he seemed much more menacing.

For many years my job has been to interview Australians of all ages, lifestyles, incomes, geography and household makeup. We would talk as individuals, couples or in group discussions. We would discuss the big issues in life like aspirations, health, lifestyle and on and on, as well as the seemingly trivial ones. I would learn about their attitudes and behaviours.

Sometimes I would not interview at all but mostly just sit and observe. As an experiment in one study my colleague, Rob, suggested we invite groups of six friends to gather in one of their homes. Armed with prompt cards with discussion questions, we turned on the cameras and left them to it to talk for a couple of hours. While I would love to tell you this was a groundbreaking technique, considering we had only attempted this once, it wasn't.

Rob conducted another experiment while researching young men in Brixton, London, before its gentrification. Unlike most

research participants (that I know of), they all turned up stoned. Maybe, just maybe, the convoluted thoughts of a cannabis-infused mind will provide extraordinary insights. Disappointingly, they proceeded to talk nonsense (and some gibberish) all evening.

Getting people to open up and talk is easy. Some years ago I spent time interviewing prison inmates with a history of violence. People later asked me whether I felt threatened by them. We were locked in a room together and I guess if they wanted to, they could have done some damage. At first I did wonder whether they might react adversely if I asked the wrong thing or gave a wrong impression, but that was short-lived and I soon felt safe in their company. I was there to listen with intent, sincerity and lack of any sign of judgement (although it is hard not to judge much of what they told me, like how funny it was to inject inmates with HIV).

Having someone sit and genuinely listen to them just doesn't happen in other circumstances. And truth is, everyone wants to be heard. (There was one time interviewing the inmates that I *was* slightly fearful. Having completed an interview, I knocked on the glass pane of the guard station so as to exit the locked wing, In response I got a loud 'What do you want?')

'I'd like to leave now,' I said.

'Don't you all,' she replied, taking her time to let me out.

Ironically, it was a 103-year-old man who actually did trap me inside his home by locking the doors and holding onto the key. He insisted on telling his very lengthy life story as a South African cricketer and I listened, partly because he was 103 but mainly because I had no choice in the matter.

I believe that everyone has a story to tell. Frequently I would leave an interview awed by what I had heard.

This book reveals what I have learnt over countless hours of interviews with ordinary Australians of all walks of life, ethnicity and other characteristics that reflect our population. It is a journey into the lives of everyday Australians and our nation as whole.

She'll be right – or will she?

There will be times you will nod in agreement and others where you vehemently disagree. All reactions are welcome, although hopefully more of the former than the latter.

Welcome to an exploration of life according to Australians!