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# WOMEN OF A CERTAIN COURAGE

Edited by Bron Bateman

 **FREMANTLE PRESS**

## Trigger warning key

Readers are advised to take care

AB	abuse
ABL	ableism
ABT	abortion
CA	child abuse
DTH	death or dying
DI	deceased Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people may be mentioned
DV	domestic violence
HMP	homophobia and heterosexism
MCS	infertility/miscarriages
MT	medical trauma
MLS	mental illness
PRG	pregnancy/childbirth
PSY	psychiatric setting
RCM	racism and racial slurs
SH	self-harm
SA	sexual assault
SXM	sexism and misogyny
SUI	suicide
TRP	transphobia and trans misogyny

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## Introduction – Bron Bateman

When Fremantle Press approached me to edit this anthology, I was immediately delighted – both with the opportunity, and particularly the topic. Women and Courage. How much more perfect a subject to explore? I was reminded of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, saying to her husband before the murder of Duncan: ‘[b]ut screw your courage to the sticking place and we’ll not fail.’

As I began to work on this anthology, I wrote these words on a sticky note on my laptop and prepared for the creative journey of a lifetime.

‘Being a woman’ and ‘courage’ are written into our culture as being oppositional – or at least not often remarked upon. The narratives of courage are constructed around the sports ground, the battlefield, or man-versus-mountain survival stories. Courage is often gendered as a masculine experience, grounded in physicality and strength. Yet, even while writing these words I am struck by how audacious and limiting that seems.

When I invited eighteen women to tell me their stories of courage, I hoped for, and received, entirely different narratives.

Women endure the greatest of privations – and these are often embodied, often linked with our roles as parents or parents-to-be, attuned to our reproductive capacity, but also with our capacity to fight for what we believe in; to survive natural

disasters; to endure chronic illness, mental and physical. Then there are, of course, the dangers of moving through the world as a woman – compounded by colour, age, sexual orientation, gendered identity – and of being targets of physical violence from men who are strangers, and from men we know.

I knew that the women I asked would have stories of courage, but when I approached them to write an essay, nearly every woman said: ‘Oh, but I’m not courageous ...’

I told them how they appeared through my eyes, and the eyes of others: the courage they displayed during their experiences as Indigenous women and gender-diverse women, their battles with serious illness, both visible and not openly seen; infertility; domestic violence and sexual abuse; their survival of bushfires and floods; of living with mental illness and institutional and governmental oppression; their survival of violence wrought by partners, or police with guns and horses; their willingness to lay down their bodies in protest.

As the stories of these remarkable women arrived, I found their courage confirmed, and myself moved to tears, by their acts of bravery and survival, their determination to live openly and courageously in a world that preferred they did not exist – and to thrive.

\*

Water is a pervasive element in this collection. Trans woman Eliora Avrahami learns to swim from her mother, and survives the currents of abuse as a child, and contends with mental illness as a mother and wife in her adult years, alongside a productive academic career. Sally Scott writes compellingly about near-drowning as a child and caught as an adult in the rips of bipolar disorder and breast cancer. Michelle Sweeney explores the internal impact of the 2022 Lismore floods, trying to hold it together as others who needed her therapy fell apart.

Elder Averil Dean, Renée Pettitt-Schipp, Cynthia Dearborn and Shannon Meyerkort find their voices and the power of being women in their relationships with the land. Elder Averil survives the steady, excoriating effects of racism experienced by Indigenous people in Western Australia, all the while living a gracious and productive life. Her education of generations of young people is a testament to her endurance as an Aboriginal Elder. Renée writes movingly of her bond with Aboriginal women and Elders in the ‘Save Beeliar Wetlands’ protests and their aftermath. After a childhood of silence, Cynthia describes her appearance before the court on charges of criminal trespass and her emerging voice as a lesbian educator in the face of threats of violence. Shannon survives the heartrending danger of Canberra bushfires as a young woman from the city. Her writing bristles with the immediacy of terror and anxiety when life is stripped back to simple survival.

Annamaria Weldon navigates her diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease with self-aware determination, explaining how the act of travelling changes her relationship to a degenerative illness. Jo Giles lives with the processes and probability of dying from cystic fibrosis until a double lung transplant offers her a second chance. Through prose and poetry, Esther Ottaway writes about autism in women – the massively underdiagnosed spectrum disorder that is most often viewed through the prism of male experience – and of how she and her daughter have come to flourish in the world.

Anna Jacobson, Penny Jane Burke, Nadia Rhook and Paola Magni explore the personal power and freedom that can be attained through education. Anna is disrupted from a PhD by a controlling psychiatrist until she regains agency through MAD studies and psychiatric survivor activism. Penny Jane escapes the decimating violence of an abusive spouse, driven by her desire to

attain higher education and a voice that can liberate both herself and other women. As a historian, Nadia explores the foundations of colonialist Australia and the place where that intersects with her own experiences with infertility and IVF. With scarcely a backward look, Paola Magni leaves her home country, forging her own path as one of the world's foremost forensic scientists.

Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon is amongst the ten percent of women who experience endometriosis. Its intertwining of pain and doctors' blank refusal to recognise that pain will resonate with many other women. Lisa Collyer's essay confronts domestic violence and what it takes to walk away. She does this through snapshots across time, documenting the impact of many small moments from childhood to adulthood.

The anthology is bookended with the two most confronting and polemic essays of all. These are the pieces by Indigenous lawyer and activist Megan Krakouer, and gender-diverse activist and educator Andrea Thompson.

Megan rails about the hatred and institutional racism inherent in a white, colonialist, patriarchal society, where the removal of Indigenous children from their families continues unabated. She tells us that she speaks not for herself but for all the women she walks beside – the Elders, Aunties, Grandmothers and Mothers – who are left to pick up the pieces of broken lives. Her piece is a clarion call for radical love and radical change.

Andrea describes herself as an ordinary woman but she also happens to be extraordinary – she writes unflinchingly about the deprivations and oppressions of being a trans woman in a predominantly heterosexual society.

The fierceness and resilience of these two women together contain all the other shapes and iterations of courage in between.

The women in this *Women of a Certain Courage* anthology have much to teach us. Their very personal essays speak to the

universality of sisterhood. Read their work and know them a little better. Know yourself a little better. As Eliora Avrahami so eloquently writes: 'So here I am, ready to immerse myself. Ready to let go of the past, all of the fear and pain and shame, to find the bravery to accept love as well as give it.'

May all we women carry that kernel of courage in our hearts. To love. To live. To move forward.