

Where the wild things are

Stepping out of *civilisation* and into the wilderness can be a *life-changing* discovery of the *SOUL*, writes Felicity Loughrey.

Well, there are long and short answers,” says Claire Dunn when asked why she chose to spend a year in the Australian bush in a shelter made from eucalyptus saplings lashed together and thatched with blady grass. On a Skype call from a share house in Newcastle, she says: “It was partly a case of running away from a life that wasn’t serving me anymore, and partly running towards the thing that made me feel more alive than anything.”

This is where Dunn’s book, *My Year Without Matches*, comes in. City girl leaves behind a broken relationship and her job as a desk-bound conservationist for a year in the bush. “I rarely got the opportunity to be in that world that I was saving,” she says. Her memoir spans the seasons and the chapters mark the order of survival: shelter, water, fire and food.

Dunn’s book sits in a catalogue of “My year of” memoirs, where women go in search of their true self in the wilderness (or around the world, in the case of Elizabeth Gilbert’s Oprah-endorsed *Eat, Pray, Love*). Also in the Oprah canon is American author Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*, which charts the author’s 1,600-kilometre journey from California’s Mojave Desert to the border of the north-western states of Oregon and Washington. In *Wild*, Strayed was a newly divorced 26-year-old seeking to heal the pain of her mother’s death from cancer four years earlier. The gruelling Pacific Crest Trail hike was the salve her soul needed.

Last year, Strayed, now 45, was a guest of the Sydney Writer’s Festival. Robyn Davidson, the author of *Tracks*, a memoir of walking from Alice Springs to the ocean, was also a guest of the festival. Davidson’s book is now a film of the same name starring Mia Wasikowska and Adam Driver (yes! Adam from *Girls*). ▶



DAVID SWAY

Supermodel Daria Werbowy is known for her forays into wilderness – and ocean sailing.

“We all have an urge to escape the everyday and live vicariously through these stories – we like to see that anything’s possible in life,” says Jemma Birrell, artistic director of the Sydney Writer’s Festival. Birrell also points to Robert Macfarlane’s wilderness trilogy, *Mountains of the Mind*, *The Wild Places* and *The Old Ways*, which explores ancient, wild places in the United Kingdom and beyond, as part of the publishing Zeitgeist. “The more we’re bound up in technology, the more we [desire] to return to nature, thus have a hunger for books exploring this theme,” says Birrell. (Side note: Birrell describes Strayed as “luminous” in person and Davidson as “phenomenal”).

But nothing says nature in pop culture like Portland’s *Kinfolk* movement. *Kinfolk* began as a webzine by Nathan and Katie Williams: it grew with its audience to an advertising-free publication and has since evolved into epicurean gatherings on four continents. *Kinfolk* pushes a Pacific Northwest wilderness aesthetic and lifestyle that has swept Instagram.

Georgia Frances King is the flame-haired, Melbourne-born editor of the three-year-old title. “It’s the ‘cabin in the woods’ thing,” she says from her Oregon office. “Pack in everything and go live in a cabin in the woods! I feel like five years ago people talked about moving to New York. Now people talk about getting away from it all. Maybe it’s just a gen Y thing,” she muses.

So is *Kinfolk* the creator of the “find yourself in nature” trend or the mirror of it? “It would be a little bit full of ourselves to say we were the first ones to put bearded men in outdoor settings. It’s a massive compliment when people use *Kinfolk* as an adjective and a hashtag, but I think we are part of a larger movement.”

Among fashion folk there’s always been an urge to go bush. Since her days behind the counter at the famed Flamingo Park boutique in Sydney’s Strand Arcade, Jenny Kee has spent a great deal of time in the Blue Mountains. The native flora around her bush home inspires her wearable art today: see the Flamingo Waratah print. At a launch of her silk scarfs at Sydney’s Pretty Dog store, Kee entranced my primary-school-age sons with stories of waratahs and dinosaurs.

And then there are the members of the *Vogue* tribe scattered all over the globe. (Of course, the internet allows all of this.) Plum Sykes lives and writes in the English countryside. Supermodel Stella Tennant, along with her four children, calls the town of Edrom, in the Scottish Borders, home. Raphaelite troubadour Karen Elson travels the country backroads of Nashville, Tennessee, to get home. Amanda Brooks, author of *I Love Your Style*, is enjoying a sabbatical in the English countryside that she documents on Instagram ([instagram.com/amandacbrooks](https://www.instagram.com/amandacbrooks)). A recent post featured a Monet-worthy picnic among bluebells.

Canadian supermodel Daria Werbowy has ditched the fashionable life. She now lives in Cork, Ireland, with her carpenter boyfriend. Her notable wild-woman adventures include a 24-day sailing adventure across the Atlantic with her father, brother and sister, and months exploring Central America. There’s an anchor

tattoo on her finger, a curlicue snake tattoo on her ankle, bands on her toes and an inscription on the back of her neck. She told New York’s *T Magazine*: “Sailing is the closest I can get to nature – it’s adrenaline, fear, a constant challenge and learning experience, an adventure into the unknown. And, of course, there is nothing better than wearing the same T-shirt for days and not brushing my hair for weeks.”

Back to the reality of Dunn’s life without matches in northern New South Wales. She endured a sweltering summer in the dry sandstone country: “It was so hot and humid for most of the day, you couldn’t do much. I had a wide-brimmed Akubra hat and wore long-sleeved cotton shirts and tried to be down at the waterhole for the bulk of the day.” As for winter, she would light a fire in the morning – quite an involved task without matches – or go walking

for hours in a cloak with an elven hood hand-sewn from a woollen blanket. “My fingers and toes were freezing.”

The landscape “had every kind of spiky plant you could imagine and everything that would want to bite or scratch you was there”, she says. “It’s absolutely stunning, but it reveals its beauty slowly. It takes a bit of time to really appreciate the beauty of the Australian bush.”

Dunn, now 35, grew up in the New South Wales Hunter Valley with three brothers and one sister. As a child she had “absolutely loved” Enid Blyton’s *The Faraway Tree* series. Later, as a young adult, she read Davidson’s memoir *Tracks*. “A woman on a mission of self-discovery was something that always fascinated me.” In between there were shifts dressed as a koala soliciting donations for the Wilderness Society on Sydney streets, and her grown-up office job as a conservationist.

Then Dunn enrolled in the Nature Philosophy program, run by Kate Rydge and Sam Robertson. On Skype, Rydge has a tawny, model-like beauty and yoga-teacher calm. She coos to her two toddler children throughout the call as she roams her farmhouse, from the deck of a cool verandah to settling into a couch with a wood-burning stove in the background.

At age 26, Rydge spent a year living in the wilderness in New Jersey’s Pine Barrens with Tom Brown Junior’s Tracker School. “I’m an Aussie girl and I’d never really seen so much snow before.” She slept in a shelter, dug into the ground with a roof of timber, bark, leaf litter and snow on top. “It really did change my life.”

Rydge had always wanted to create a similar opportunity for Australians. From their homestead, Rydge and Robertson offer earth skills courses and a year-long residential program. In the year that Dunn went bush, she shared the property with five others. The participants built individual shelters and would go to town for food supplies once a month.

“Towards the end, I didn’t want to leave the land,” says Dunn. “I didn’t want to go into town.” Dunn would check her email every fortnight at Rydge’s house and laughs that she was so cut off she didn’t realise there was a federal election until the day before.

“One of the main things I confronted that year,” says Dunn, “was all the ways I was conditioned to be striving and ambitious. Even though I set myself goals, I would come up against [such

questions as:] ‘Who am I without my neighbours, my routine?’ And you realise how much of your identity is structured around your routine and your set role in society.

“It was actually a painful process of undoing those patterns, confronting the self-pity. I feel like I got cracked open. There were times where I thought the ways I knew myself weren’t there anymore. I feel like it was actually an initiation into a different way of thinking. I feel a lot softer and like well worn-in leather.”

There’s a tension in Dunn’s story between opting out and writing a book about the experience, an altogether different and ambitious venture. “The book has been a whole other solitary wilderness in itself,” she says. “It’s been really, really difficult. It’s put me behind a computer for long hours and in solitude. It forced me to question: ‘Am I being sucked back into that pattern of being ambitious and having a book to my name? Why am I doing this?’”

I ask Kate Rydge, her facilitator, about this contradiction. “Claire’s a writer,” says Rydge calmly. “She was journalling her experience throughout the year. I don’t think she escaped for a year. What she did was move closer towards knowing who she is, devoid of any feedback loops. I think the world needs people who actually go into these deeply personal experiences, in the wild of nature, and are able to bring that wild out. It’s definitely a theme for humanity now. We need to understand it more. We’re not separate from it. I champion it.”

Wendy Matthews, an Australian-Canadian singer-songwriter, believes her latest album of original songs, *The Welcome Fire*, is the product of her solitary bush existence. “A lot of it has to do with the quality of writing since I’ve lived up here.” That would be her place inland from Coffs Harbour, where she lives with her border collie, Bear. “It gives you a whole different internal life. It has affected my songwriting. It’s never been more apparent than on this new record.”

Matthews left home at 16 with a swag of Pendleton blankets for a life of busking and travelling across the US, Mexico and Asia, before arriving in Australia. After 17 years in a Bondi flat, Matthews moved to the countryside. A devoted fan of Idaho organic farming and glamping identity MaryJane Butters, Matthews lived in a glamorous teepee on her property. The teepee is now cleaned and folded in a shed, she tells me. She’s since built a mudbrick home with two verandahs and views across a rainforest and the ocean.

“There’s the reality of it all,” says Matthews. “You have very romantic notions and there are daily things that scare you, just challenges, one after another.” Like a black snake snoozing under her mattress when she lived in the teepee. “He was simply trying to keep warm. When I noticed him, I left for the day and when I came back that evening he had finished his warm sleep and he had gone.” (After chatting on Skype, Matthews emails to tell me she’d just found a mildly venomous brown tree snake in the house. “Before you run for a broom, you run to Google!”)

“I learnt so much from building this little place,” says Matthews. “Instead of wondering what linen I’ll bring up to the teepee, now

I think: ‘What will the roof truss look like?’ It makes me more pragmatic, I suppose. It also softens and tenderises you a bit. That’s part of the process. Whatever your stuff is, you’re very much confronted with it.

“It changes you. To have to work for everything you have and know where everything comes from. Even being alone with yourself. I’ve got girlfriends who can’t spend even one night on their own. I live on top of a mountain, all by myself. I can’t remember when I last felt fear at night. I’m not afraid at all and it surprises me.”

The obvious idea is to bundle this escape from modern life with technology, laptops, smartphones and social media. “I have a problem with it, living how I do,” says Matthews of new technology. “Even at concerts, the audience stares at you through iPhone screens. Let’s just put the little screens away for a while.” At their concerts, alt-rockers the Yeah Yeah Yeahs actively

instruct members of the audience to put away their smartphones. Posters at their performances advise: “Please do not watch the show through a screen on your smart device/camera.” *Touché*.

But the desire to escape everyday life is pre-Facebook, pre-Foursquare, pre-Snapchat. Robyn Davidson made her extraordinary trek across the Gibson Desert in the 1970s and, interestingly, her father spent the 1920s and 1930s walking across Africa.

“Could such a journey be made in the same way now?” she asks in a new epilogue for *Tracks*. “No, absolutely not ... New communications technology would make it impossible to get lost, no matter how hard you tried. When I set

out it was still just possible to travel through that country as a free agent, to stay beneath any kind of radar, to take full responsibility for your own life.”

Hidden in the privacy settings of my iPhone 5, under Location Services and then below in System Services, is a minute-by-minute geo-diary of my life. My phone identifies my work, my home and the places in between. It tells what time I arrive at the office in the morning, when and where I go for lunch, and what time I depart in the evening. How do people have affairs if they have this feature enabled? Skip out on work? Let alone walk on unknown land? Davidson is right. There’s no chance to be under the radar when the phone in your pocket is receiving Wi-Fi signals. (This feature isn’t available on an iPhone 4, so if you’re still using an older iPhone you don’t have to worry about this particular issue.)

Davidson goes on to say: “The question I’m most commonly asked is: ‘Why?’ A more pertinent question might be: ‘Why is it that more people don’t attempt to escape the limitations imposed upon them?’ If I could bumble my way across a desert, then anyone could do anything.”

Talking on Skype with Dunn in her new home, we’ve looped and dipped through her long and short answers for why she spent a year without matches. “It’s an archetypal hunger for stepping off the treadmill and seeing what emerges. It doesn’t need to be in the bush,” she says. “Hopefully my story inspires people to say yes to their own wild cravings.” Hell, yes! ■

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