





dear diary

girls have been spilling
their thoughts into diaries
for generations.



WORDS SERENA COADY

If I were to measure the early stages of my life according to the three major themes of my diaries, it would go something like this.

I find my feet in the written world by religiously cataloguing every swear word I pick up in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*. I'm too young to watch this, but I have an older brother, so there. Inscriptions of "shagadelic", "bastard" and "big crap" grace the scented pages of a journal that features a holographic fairy on the cover. My mum found it for me in a Blue Mountains bookshop. When she clocks what I've used it for, she takes it away. I get it – she can't have her six-year-old walking around reciting the words, "Someone took a *shite* in a pine tree." Fortunately, my young brain is like cat litter and I've already absorbed all the bad words.

I grow up during the Y2K years when blockbusters like *The Matrix* and *Minority Report* ensure that "new tech" is everything. Naturally, I become a proud owner of a Girl Tech Password Journal. Housed within a plastic, battery-operated case, these diaries can be unlocked with your voice and you can even program an intruder alert. Some of them even come with invisible ink. Yep, this one's for all the espionage gurlies (AKA those raised on a diet of *Harriet the Spy* and *Spy Kids*).

With Girl Tech, we enter a new dawn of privacy, so I'm able to speak candidly about the two things on my agenda: dogwalking and the people I'm in love with. Giddy with the responsibility of being a new dog owner, my diary became a to-do list of all the walks I need to take my dog on. I check in every day, noting whether I had succeeded or failed in walking. In between these important logistics is the good stuff: crushes. In these parts I analyse why, at the school disco, I only got my third pick of slow-dance partner for that very sad Enrique Iglesias song.

Once I've dragged myself through the haze of puberty, thick with the scent of Impulse body spray and first cigarettes, I'm on to bigger and better things. My teen diaries take on a more experimental form with the aid of a newly acquired digital camera. I fill scrapbooks with photographs of my friends, movie tickets, and post-it notes of all the inside jokes we share. My diary is no longer a secret fragment of my soul; it's the opposite: a testament to how full, how colourful,

I believe my life has become. I hope someone – anyone – opens it up and sees for themselves.

The diaries of my girlhood not only helped me find my voice as a writer, they were also the building blocks of my identity, offering a safe haven of autonomy and self-exploration. In my diary, I could learn how to express my thoughts and sift through my experiences, fears, first loves and dreams for the future.

The first recorded female diarist is said to be Margery Kempe, an English mystic from the early 15th century. She was illiterate, so she had a scribe pen her life story, feelings and revelations. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which is written in the third person, Kempe describes herself as "the creature". (Um, icon behaviour.)

Fast forward to the mid-20th century. *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank becomes one of the most cherished diaries ever written. The book traces Anne's life as she is forced into hiding during World War II, making it more than just a record of a girl's inner thoughts, but a reminder of the atrocities of discrimination and war.

In the 21st century, the diary serves as the basis of hugely popular pieces of culture, including *Mean Girls*, where the Burn Book is a catalogue of a high school's nasty secrets (as well as a major source of drama), and *Bridget Jones's Diary*, where the unlucky-in-love lead chronicles her bad habits, hang-ups and interactions with hot British men in turtlenecks.

In these years, the format of the diary itself undergoes its biggest transformation yet. The physical, written diary doesn't disappear, but the Nintendo DS *My Secret Diary* game, Apple Notes app, and YouTube vlogs become widely used platforms.

Mel Anderson, an artist based in Southwest Riverina, has the most extensive collection of personal diaries I have ever seen. When we speak, she pulls out two trunks filled with her diaries. Some of these books date back to 1983. There's even a diary full of special characters and symbols: a hieroglyphic-like code she invented when she was 11.





"inside a diary, we can keep track of all the people, and what they leave behind, as they journey alongside us"



In Mel's teen years, Holly Hobbie journals were in. They were usually blue, hardcover, A5, with a lockable strap. But Mel was never about this aesthetic. "Mine weren't pretty at all. I just needed them to be A5 notebooks so they were easy to carry around. I wanted one with me all the time. I would write when I was sitting, waiting for the bus or the train," says Mel, 52. She describes herself as being socially awkward – her diary allowed her to take what was happening inside her head, and get it out. By writing, she could work through her emotions, even if she didn't always know what they were.

Mel's favourite diary-writing practice is to do it first thing. "I wake up, I'm not self-censoring, I have let go of the day before, and then I write. It gets everything out of the way, and I can be me; I'm not hanging on to anything," she says. "If you don't know what to write, just keep writing... Because it always goes somewhere if you do it long enough. And that's where the surprises are." While smartphones have taken away the need to tote around a physical book, for Mel, writing by hand is way more special. "I can touch-type fast, but it's not the same as sitting down, opening a book, getting a pen, and writing. There's something about your hand and your brain connection. You have this direct connection. It becomes an extension of you. A written diary helps me connect with what's going on in my head in ways that typing doesn't."

Doris Brett, 73, has always loved words. The Melbourne-based clinical psychologist could read and write from the age of four. Despite this, she admits she isn't a lifelong diary keeper. Rather, she kept one during three intense periods of her life. Her first diary was kept during her teen years, when the popular format was "fancy" leather notebooks without a lock. "My older sister stole it and read it to her friends, some of whom I had crushes on and were talked about in there. They all laughed – she took great delight in telling me about it. That was it for diary writing for me for a long time," Doris says.

In her 40s, an ovarian cancer diagnosis prompted Doris to return to regular journaling. "Cancer does wonders for writer's block. It is a slightly drastic cure for that, but it works," she says. The diary she kept during these years felt vastly different from the one she kept as a teen. She recorded her thoughts on her computer, often in brief, perfunctory entries as she struggled with "chemo brain." Nonetheless, it offered her some relief. "When you're dealing with something that's formless, like certain feelings, it's harder to deal with it because you don't know what you're dealing with. Once you put a name to it, and write about it in your diary, it acts as a differentiator. That's what language does – it makes it easier to understand."

This diary became the basis for the memoir she wrote about her cancer journey: *Eating the Underworld*. Years later, when her husband went through a long period of illness, she created a daily email diary. "It was for all our friends, which was interesting because while everything I put in there was true, I couldn't make it gloomy. I didn't want to depress people. I needed to entertain my audience, as well as keep them up to date," Doris says.

The idea of the diary being less introspective and more social is an attitude shared by Sydney schoolgirl Emma McAlea. "During lockdown, people reread their diaries, but I just rewatched my videos of school so I could see all the normal things I missed," says Emma, 17. While she was fond of the popular yet "extortionately priced" kikki.K journals in her younger years, Emma admits that she was never consistent with writing in them. So, she started documenting her life in videos and posting them on YouTube. "I'm the last generation who didn't grow up with an iPad, but I found my way to technology anyway," she says.

The videos, including "monday at my australian high school :)" and "my life as a love letter", offer treasured glimpses into girlhood: heels she selects for her friend's birthday party; late-night divulgements about her school musical; rainy bus rides home. "I love the thought of looking back on my high-school journey one day. Video immortalises so many of my memories and makes them accessible. For me, it works better than writing in a diary, because I'm not the most amazing writer. This way, I can capture the atmosphere, too," Emma says.

Emma's diaries take on another form of time capsule, allowing her to look back in 10, 20, 30 years, every time she has the question: what did a moment in my life look like back then? In these clips, she can see what friends wore, what they listened to, how they spoke, the cars they drove, the houses they lived in. "My vlogs are about what's happening around me. It's my friends' story, as well as mine. A lot of the girls from when I first started my YouTube channel in 2018 have become almost like characters in a story."

A common misconception is that the diary exists mainly for the purpose of harbouring our innermost thoughts away from the prying eyes of others. As with Doris's email diary and Emma's vlogs, the diary goes far beyond being a chronicle of the self. Life, after all, isn't a solo trip through the cosmos. Inside a diary, we can keep track of all the people, and what they leave behind, as they journey alongside us. ✨