

Primavera
OR,
THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE

GIULIA GIUFFRÈ

Also by Giulia Giuffrè

A Writing Life: Interviews with Australian Women Writers (1990)

Who do you think you are? (1992)

Primavera, or the Time of Your Life

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*For Mum (Marie De Lorenzo)
and the memory of Dad (Gaetano 'Tom' Giuffrè)*

All accounts which draw on memory are in some way legendary ...
Sheila & Celia Kitzinger¹



Mum, there's no point in doing it unless it's true.
Orlando Bailey, aged 16, about the writing of this book



Horace: *Ridentem dicere verum/quid vetat?*²
[What forbids a laughing person from telling the truth?]



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INTRODUCTION

- *What's for dinner, Mum?*
- *Food*
- *What are you writing, Giulia?*
- *A book.*



My children are now 25 and 23 and I have always kept notes on our lives together, no matter how busy I was, scribbling in odd moments – often at the oblique angle of distraction – on any bit of paper to hand. The notes themselves were a gesture of communication from those traditionally silent years of a woman's life, the ardent years when her children are young.

As a new mother I was told often enough: *You'll forget about this funny thing they used to do, or this thing that they used to say. They grow so quickly.* So with the tenacity of a writer, good material unexpectedly to hand, and like a latter-day Boswell to the children's collective Dr Johnson, I have tried to grasp some of the fleeting experiences of their young lives. (In doing this I have attempted to avoid the example of another literary figure: father of the ill-fated Tristram Shandy, Walter Shandy, who, while passionately involved in his theoretical study of childhood, neglected totally the actual needs of his real child.)

I know that you cannot freeze the time of childhood while it is happening; but I do believe that literature allows you to savour time afterwards, like the stored sunlight of a good red wine. I offer these fragments of childhood, not as pressed flowers, so dull and disappointing when compared to the real thing, but as an album of *scriptographs* which may empower memory and imagination to recreate your own childhood. The book is about three children, two of them now in their 20's and one much older. More importantly, it is about the complex, sustaining, often crazy relationships within a family. Implicit in my children's

childhood is mine. In living through their childhood I have been re-living my own very different one. I hope that this personal account will strike resonances in readers and remind them of their own child-self or children.

Before this I had written shopping lists, love letters, academic theses and literary reviews. But now I found I wanted to write something different. When I was studying in Oxford in the 1970s, perhaps in reaction to the prevailing Oxford Englit obsession with accurate but relatively useless detail, I had a recurring dream about a book that contained all sorts of things: sandalwood, household hints, odds and ends, a mixture of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the *Bible* and *The Times*, a heartening book containing criticism, bacon rashers, the totality of things needed! A book with a dense texture – *panforte*, not sponge. Years later, and while writing *Primavera*, I have had similar dreams about heterogeneous mixtures of different flavours – cheese, wood, peppermint! What does this mean? (Apart from Orlando's conclusion, *Mum, you're mad!*) Possibly that, unconstrained by genre and with head *and* heart, I wanted to write a veritable, impossible encyclopaedia of everything in my life that was important to me.

Je est un autre [I is someone else]¹ as Rimbaud put it, and consequently *Giulia*, young and old, must take her chances with all the other characters in the book. I have mostly used real names, but I would not say that the book is a work of unalloyed fact, or that there is no embellishment, selectivity and dramatisation. I will say, however, that though nothing has been invented, everything has been imagined.



Children are time visible. Their childhood stretches eternal and yet is over before one knows it. Each day is a century, each year is a second. Children connect us with the journey of life from birth to death, from one infinity to another. Babies and children make life turbulent and joyful. They unlock vast catchments of anger and tenderness. They make you think. They make you feel. They can give and inspire a love without reserve. By their nature they immerse you in the life of the body and bring you face to face with the intractable detail of reality.

Children represent hope and continuity. They are *primavera*, the spring, the perpetual renewal of the world. And just as spring in nature is not all sweetness, but can be a time of bruised skies and storms, surprising upheavals and stubborn growth, so too, children are complex – innocent and murderous, lovable and insistent.

Children have to grow up. But when they are young they act and feel and think as children. A few times in exasperation at some particular activity or omission I have said to my son, Orlando: *For goodness sake, stop acting like a child!* and he has replied reasonably enough, *Mum, I am a child.* And on reflection I would say, happy the child who can be a child and have a childhood. That itself is a blessing. One of my old textbooks had it that *Anche Dante Alighieri fu fanciullo* [Even Dante was a child once].² It is true that just as we are all born and all die, we are all young once, but childhood is another matter. Many do not have the privilege of a childhood.

There is a parallel realization that your own childhood remains vital to you yourself. Adults can often go cold and cautious. Children instinctively understand the value of play, spontaneity and enjoyment. How desirable to reconnect with the qualities of moderately happy young children! Always to keep that natural directness, realism, mad humour, imaginativeness, curiosity, poetry, *joie de vivre* and accepting trust in life. To remember feelingly exactly what it was like to be a child. Empathy, which relies on imagination, is all. It is that quality which allows us to understand our children when we do, and ourselves and others, if we do.

Childhood is precious because life is precious. Children are the distillate of life, the essence of the future. One more dream. When I was in hospital in 1988, recovering from a series of cancer operations, I had a dream that *in a Sydney with pavements of black glass, I needed children's toys to be sent to me, and that I needed to re-learn the language.* Looking back I understand this to mean that I wished to rediscover the playful creativity and the language I had once known of love and joy. When my life was threatened my psyche was telling me that I could find a path back to life by *remembering* all my children, including myself.

Coogee, June 2010



