

Academic Freedom: Vivien Wilson

As the XPT pulls out of Central Station, a glorious sense of freedom fills me with unexpected joy. I'm escaping! No P&C Meetings, school runs; cooking, cleaning, or shopping for the next seven days. I've handed over full responsibility of our two lovely but squabbling teenage daughters to my husband. It's his turn to play the Wicked Witch of the West.

That evening I arrive at The University of New England in Armidale for my first residential, part of a B.A. by distance education. I have a room all to myself. After years of domesticity, I'm keen to live the academic life in an ivory tower, well a brick one, if only for a few days.

On my first morning, I wake to a frost covered campus. It's freezing in Armidale. Grateful for my fluffy full length dressing gown, I negotiate the communal unisex bathroom with its windows open to the elements. It's very strange sharing a bathroom with men I've never met. I'm not sure of the protocol. Am I expected to greet them, or wait till our personal hygiene routines are over, before saying hello? I don't look my best at this time of day, so I hurry through my ablutions, and scamper back to my room.

As we all queue for breakfast, we smile and introduce ourselves before heading over to our first lecture - English 101 An Introduction to Modern Literary Theory. I wonder whether I'm in the right place. It's totally incomprehensible but the next two lectures fill me with enthusiasm - Drama (Shaw) and Poetry (Yeats). Then I meet my tutor and I'm inspired. In the evenings, over dinner, and lubricated by wine, we have long heated discussions about love, life and literature, until it's time to rug up and return to our chilly rooms. My head is so full of Yeats

and Shaw that thoughts of home are banished, well, almost banished. As I lie in my single bed, I wonder how my family is coping. Will Julia remember her medication? Will Kate finish her HSC Assignment? With a full timetable of lectures the week is soon over and I'm heading back home.

My husband and the girls are on the platform to greet me. We hug and, on the drive home, they recount their adventures. The house is spotless and there's a hot meal in the oven.