

My Demons: Vivien Wilson

I hate exams. I've always hated exams. They were the reason I left school at 16.

Since having children, I'd had a series of dead-end part-time jobs, and was frankly bored by mothers' groups at the school gates. I wanted more. I secretly aspired to write, but I didn't tell anyone.

I enrolled in a course at TAFE - HSC English and Modern History - leading I hoped, to a mature age entry into university. My mother told me I was ridiculous at 44 and she wouldn't be able to look after my young daughters if they got sick as she had her own life. My husband just reminded me how much I hated exams.

It was 1989 and twice a week 12 of us, all over the age of 25 from different backgrounds and with different motives, huddled in an old timber building in Narrabeen. It was boiling in summer and freezing in winter despite the ancient odour-emitting gas heater, but I was hooked from the first.

When not in class, I'd spend my days shunning housework as I absorbed *Pride and Prejudice*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* and poetry by John Donne and Hopkins. The class thrived on an undercurrent of competition, as we studied the horrors of World War I, the Chinese revolution, war in Indochina and Hitler's Third Reich. Some were better at English and some at History. My challenge was remembering dates. Every wall in my house became home to a series of bright yellow post-it notes.

Then the year was over. It was time to face my demons. On the day of the exam, I felt sick. I seriously considered driving to the beach instead. After all, I didn't need to prove anything to anybody. A clock on the wall ticked loudly as I scanned the questions, trying to remember to breathe. Tick, tick, tick. The invigilator paced between the desks. My pen flew across the page. I was terrified I'd never manage to answer all the questions in time.

Then it was all over. We just had to wait for the results. Finally, they were in. An envelope arrived. I stared at it as if it contained a bomb. With trepidation I tore it open. I'd passed and passed well. University opened a whole new world. I've a BA now and just published my first book.