About this book

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All in a day at Lou's Place
Creative practice from a women's refuge in Kings Cross, Sydney

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About this book</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A short history of Lou’s Place</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A day in the life of Lou’s Place</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who was Lou?</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunny Days</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rainy Days</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yesterdays</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Days</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The creative writing workshops</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The photography workshop</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrating life at Lou’s Place</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Lou’s Place</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of contributors</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

The material in this book was collected over several years, and represents the care that a number of volunteers at Lou's Place took in collecting and recording, with permission, some of the creative practice of the women who participated in their specialist programs. Delia Rothnie-Jones' early archive of creative writing was the inspiration for the eventual publication that would showcase and celebrate the creative expression of the women of Lou's Place. Other specialist volunteers were generous with their advice and reflections about their own experiences in Lou's Place, and Angela Terrell started the ball rolling by photographing some of the visual art and interior shots.

The publication of this book was made possible with a Community Engagement Grant from the University of Wollongong, who generously offered a grant to cover the publishing and printing costs of the book. It was supported by the efforts of a number of volunteers from the university community, most notably artist and photography lecturer Jacky Redgate, who closely followed the progress of the book and made valuable contributions at each stage. Grant Ellmers recruited student volunteers from his graphic design classes, and third year student Tamara Davies initiated the original design approach.

Jessica Wright, a local artist and emerging graphic designer, invested a great deal of time and care in creatively transforming some of the photographs and was a valuable contributor to the book's overall graphic design theme. She worked closely with Jacky Redgate and me to sift through the many hundreds of photographs and to pull together the final selection of creative material.

Lou's Place is staffed by a professional team of strong women who are dedicated to supporting women in need, particularly those who have a lived experience of mental health issues, substance use, domestic violence and homelessness. Deborah Banks, the Chief Executive Officer, generously allowed access to materials and resources, while Melanie Joyce (team leader) and Leah Holmes (case worker) were invaluable in coordinating creative writing and photography workshops, amongst their other duties involving crisis case management and counseling to visiting women.

The development of the book would not have been possible without Susie Manfred, one of the original founders of The Marmalade Foundation, who provided the organisational energy behind the publication with her enthusiastic and unflagging support.

Ruth Walker
About this book

The material in this book is just a small selection of nearly a decades' worth of creative practice by the women who have participated in a wide-range of activities run by volunteers at Lou's Place.

The idea of the book was first discussed in the writing classes at Lou's Place and then expanded to include samples of the work created in the visual art, jewellery and photography workshops run by volunteers. Della Kothnie-Jones, one of the first creative writing volunteers, had amassed an archive of short stories and poems from her classes, some of which were published and shared in internal bulletins that were posted on notice boards around Lou's Place. Most of this material involved short vignettes or poems rather than longer stories, although Della had kept some longer stories in her files. Some were on painful topics, some were funny, and others recorded a short glimpse of the harsh realities of the world outside the friendly spaces of Lou's Place. For new visitors they offered an intimate window into the interior world of the other women they might have just shared a meal with.

When I took over the creative writing workshops I met Jai, a very talented and troubled young woman. Jai came intermittently to classes – she was hesitant to share her own writing but was active in encouraging other women, some of whom were very shy about writing, to participate. I would bring a bag of pens and notebooks and spread them out on the table in the upstairs living room, looking expectantly around for people to start writing with me. Everyone was very polite, but I could see that I was irritating the women who were chatting or watching television while they waited for their turn in the clothing room.

I was a new volunteer and still uncertain about my role, while quite rightly the women were wary of new volunteers. My previous experience teaching writing to university students who had to be in class for assessment purpose, was not going to work. Jai was very helpful in drawing people in, suggesting that I make the writing classes a small event by bringing chocolate treats and encouraging people to join in a fun writing game or riddle over a cup of tea. She would sit and start scribbling and talking and gradually the other women in the room would wander over. Jai's advice was sound and I soon had a small coterie of regular writing participants.

Very early on Jai advocated for a book publication, arguing that it would be a great way to record a little of the creative activities that took place at Lou's Place and to showcase the talents and experiences of the women who visited the daytime refuge. The idea took root and I canvassed my writing class about what the Lou's Place book should look like, what it should include and how it should be presented. At this time, a beautiful coffee-table-sized book had been published by the nearby Wayside Chapel in Kings Cross, which many of the women also visited. I brought a copy to one of my classes and we slowly flipped through the pages, admiring the large black and white portraits of Wayside Chapel clients, both men and women. This book showcased a series of characters and personalities, many of which we all recognised from
encounters in the streets around Kings Cross. While the women in my writing class admired the publication, they were very concerned that their own photos were not used in a similar way - they wanted to author their own stories, to be active subjects rather than objects, and they didn't want anyone to recognise them through the inclusion of portrait photographs. This was not simply an issue of vanity but of security: many of the women who visit Lou's Place and other refuges are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence and privacy is crucial to them.

We decided to keep the direction of the Lou's Place book in the hands of the women contributors. They would take their own photographs in a special workshop we set up with Sydney-based artist and photographer, Jacky Redgate, and we would be careful not to incorporate portraits but instead draw on images collected by a range of specialist volunteers of the creative practice over nearly a decade. The women in my writing class approved the organisation of the book into "days" - as they pointed out, Lou's Place is a daytime refuge and some days are better than others.

Two women have invested a great deal of time and creative energy in piecing together the various elements of the book design and the creative transformation of images and material provided by the clients and volunteers of Lou's Place. Jacky Redgate, a senior lecturer in Visual Arts at the University of Wollongong and an internationally respected artist working with photography, worked closely with the women participants during a photography workshop to enable them to take a record of their own perspectives of life within Lou's Place. Jessica Wright, a local inner-city Sydney artist and graphic designer, sifted through the many hundreds of images captured by six cameras in Jacky's photography workshop, as well as the beautiful photographs collected by another volunteer photographer Angela Terrell, to create the book's final graphic design theme and format.

The most successful element of the photography workshop was the photos taken of women wearing hats, as Jacky explains in her short essay. These hats had originally belonged to Judith Ward, a regular visitor to Lou's Place and a familiar sight around Kings Cross.

The following chapters include a number of pieces of creative writing from Judith, who sadly passed away in the early stages of this book project. In honour of her passing - and in celebration of her life - we have included images of women wearing her hats throughout this book. As Judith wrote, "A woman in a hat - it just makes you feel better".

Each short writing piece collected in this book was produced in the writing workshops. Some women would take their writing away with them, and return it for feedback. For instance, one woman was writing up a longer memoir that she was keen to eventually publish, and regularly returned to the workshops for individual feedback and refinements of the same piece of text. It was inspiring to see how dedicated she was to improving her writing craft and how her writing voice got stronger week by week. I heard recently that she had finished her manuscript and had found a publisher.

This book includes some extracts taken from similarly long manuscripts. For instance, Lizzie's story is just a short piece of a much longer story - it is raw and horrifying and packs and enormous punch.

I have been coming to Lou's Place for four years now. I come here to socialise and do activities - collage, sewing and creative writing. I come here to sit and talk with the other women. Some girls like to come and ask me my advice. I started collecting hats twenty years ago. My psychiatrist wrote a letter to my GP that said I was very clean and very presentable in the 'spring racing style'. I buy my hats at op shops, usually for around $5. I am known to the spruikers in the Cross as 'The Hat Lady'. A woman in a hat - it just makes you feel better.

Judith

However, the majority of participants used the workshops as a one-hit writing event and were impatient with any editing process. I would take the scraps of paper and notes home with me and type them up verbatim although sometimes I struggled to interpret the handwriting so had to make my best guess, and sometimes I couldn't resist editing some of the text. One week Shelley had written a lovely short poem "Who am I?" that had a punchy rhythm right up until the last line, where she had added a long list of adjectives to describe her love for her daughter. I edited out a few of these adjectives to make the whole poem scan better and happily showed it to her at the next week's class. I remember her reading the poem as she got to the last line that I had changed. Her hands started shaking as she held the print-out. Then she looked me in the eye and said, "I don't have anything but my words and you have taken one of them away from me." As you can imagine, I immediately apologised and rushed to change it back! A little later she came back to me and said that she actually preferred the edited version, which we have included in the book, but I learned my lesson about being very careful and checking for permission for any changes to the original text. I have tried my hardest in the editing of this book to keep true to this commitment, to let the women use their own words to tell their own stories.

Ruth Walker