



TWO

OF US

STORY BY Rosamund Burton | PHOTOGRAPH BY Jessica Hromas

When Gold Coast-based egg donor Melissa Holman (left), 35, contacted West Australian author Rachael Johns, 37, for advice about getting published, she found herself giving the writer invaluable insights into infertility.

RACHAEL: Mel contacted me 18 months ago as she wanted some advice on submitting her memoir to a publisher. She told me she was an egg donor. I had had an idea for a book about motherhood and infertility, and Mel provided the last piece of the puzzle. Instantly, I said, “I’d love to write a fiction book about this.” She replied, “Ask me anything you want to know.” So I’d ask her questions and she’d send me sections of her manuscript, or we spoke on the phone.

I was actually thinking of having a break from writing when Mel contacted me. I’d been writing two books a year, and my husband and I had just sold the supermarket business we had in Goomalling, in the West Australia wheat belt, and moved to the Perth Hills. But I started immediately on what became *The Greatest Gift*, and wrote it in about three months.

In the first chapter an egg donor is interviewed by a radio journalist. I said, “Do you want me to name the egg donor Mel, after you, and give her a random surname?” And she

said, “No, give her the name I’m going to be when I get married.” She’d been with her partner for two years and their wedding was coming up.

I don’t know whether I would have the guts to donate my eggs. I’m scared of needles and hate the sight of blood but, being a nurse, Mel takes it all in her stride. I’m really inspired that she’s given a part of herself to create other people’s families, and also that she set up Egg Donation Australia, an online community connecting donors and recipients. She’s done a record number of donations: 19 children have been born because of her eggs, and she’s still friends with the recipient couples. She sees the children once or twice a year and they’ve been told about their roots.

I didn’t meet my dad until I was 17. I was the result of an affair. Dad was in an unhappy marriage, but he had five kids. So my mum said, “I’ll back out of your life.” When I was four months old, Mum and I moved from England to Australia. I’m pleased I met my dad when I did, because he died not long after.

She’s been a surrogate while I’ve known her, and seemed to take the pregnancy in her stride, as she was very nonchalant about it. She’s probably more of a mother than I am. It sounds weird because I’ve got three boys. But she’d be a mother to every child she came across, whereas I’m not like that.

Because she’s such a kind, giving person, Mel reminds me to think about others, and put myself in their shoes. When we met it felt as if I’d known her forever, so I’m sure the friendship will grow. I definitely wouldn’t have written the book without Mel. I feel she’s been way more helpful to me, than I have to her.

MELISSA: When Rachael said she wanted to write a novel about egg donation I thought she was kidding, but she immediately started working on the book and sent me a few chapters. I thought, “This is great.” Then I was like, “Hurry up and finish the next chapter.” I wanted to know what happened next.

I had read two of her books before I made contact with her – *Jilted* and *The Art of Keeping Secrets* – both of which I loved. But I hadn’t clicked until a couple of months after our first telephone call that Rachael had written them.

I started donating back in 2009. I was 27. I saw an “Egg Donor Wanted” ad in a newspaper. I googled “egg donation”, and found story after story of couples desperate for a donor. I’d had two kids and didn’t want any more, so I donated to a couple who had been trying for 13 years to have a baby, and they had a little boy.

I was delighted that I could do something simple that changed people’s lives, so I donated again. I’ve donated more than 20 times, and been a surrogate twice. I had three miscarriages the first time, which was hard, but my first child as a surrogate, Nina, was born in 2015 and the second, Parker, was born this January.

Rachael thinks I’m very maternal, but I’m not. As a surrogate, I’m just growing the baby, and I’m very happy to hand the baby back to its parents when it’s born.

Rachael and I share the same values. My parents are missionaries and raised me to be of service, to make the world a better place. Rachael also had a religious upbringing. We both identify with the complexities that go with that, trying to work out what you stand for and believe, and where you fit into the world.

Life is really good now. I met Mal about five months before I got to know Rachael, and we’re getting married soon. He’s the love of my life. He has a son, aged nine, and I’ve got two girls, aged 14 and nine, so we’re one happy little family.

You find people in the world who are your tribe, and Rachael is that for me. We’ve got a similar sense of humour. We’re both parents. We both love writing. I was just some newbie writer who she didn’t know at all. She could have not given me two seconds of her time, but she was very generous.

I’ve loved being able to help her write a book about one of my passions. When she told me she’d named a character after me, I was chuffed. It’s a huge compliment. ■

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