



NIKKI GEMMELL

## The long way home

I'm back. For good. From England, which is such a crowded, aggressive, uncertain land to live in – uncertain about where it's going and what it's become. So, after 14 years, I've washed that land right out of my hair. The whole family has, and as new arrivals in Oz all I can say is: we're getting into it like a showbag.

"It's a pure question of weather," wrote that wise Antipodean, Katherine Mansfield, in London almost a century ago. Ah yes, the weather. Every year the English winters were becoming harder to bear. It felt like the cold had curled up in my bones and could never be scraped out; my marrow was screaming for sun and I'd lost that lovely Aussie habit of smiling when I talk – it was the wan light, I think, that did it.

There was also the matter of three Pommy tin-lids who insisted stars only happen in DVDs and pools only happen indoors. Coupled with an austere Britain grimming down, the weight of overcrowding, a stretched public service and a mummy saying words she shouldn't, too often, in a life consisting of seemingly little else but a school run twice a day across three clogged London suburbs – who wouldn't flee? It wasn't an optimistic place to raise kids anymore, but an anxious one. Handbags were always tight beside you, tube carriages scanned for suspicious-looking backpacks, sirens incessant.

The recent riots have been brewing for a long time now, a year at least; the aggression and anger in the streets was palpable.

And now: rescued by a looser, lighter life. In a little pocket of seaside Australia with a kookaburra on top of the hills hoist and neighbourhood kids zooming through houses; the whole blissful Aussie childhood I thought long lost. The pale little Londoners have slipped into it like dirty mugs into a dishwasher. We gaze up at the stretched glory of the stary night and I point out the mighty Southern Cross and get a little teary, I must admit, then they're tumbling into bed

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exhausted from running about in all the fresh air and sunshine – that's growing them tall, that's honey-ing them up – and I wonder why on Earth it took us so long to come back.

London stole my optimism, Australia has restored it. I feel like I'm being mainlined in a sense of belonging; something I fought tooth and nail against in the younger, wilder years. But I need it as I age. Returning is about the serenity and stillness that comes from being part of a deeply known world; the ease of it. My husband and I spent years being outsiders

in foreign lands and revelling in that status; but my God, the relief, now, of belonging. It's hitting us like a long cool drink after a sweltering summer's day.

I had to leave Australia to reclaim Australia; to see it with new eyes – something I'll be writing about in future columns. And sex! Along the lines of my, er, racier novels. Female things, hell male things too, life, the universe, everything. So who am I? Former 'Gong girl, Sydneysider, Northern Territorian, novelist and now – just – mum of four; the latest addition so newly minted he's still unnamed. The monikers we loved so much in Britain (Cosmo, Milo, Holden) just aren't working in Oz for some reason...

So here's to the solace of familiarity; the thrumming, throat-swelling joy at being back. England, stimulating, yes – but my heart is held hostage by the Great Southern-Land. In exile I learnt one searing thing: life is about wringing the most happiness we can out of our time on Earth, and for me that means old mates and family and land and beauty – a spiky, prickly, ravishing Australian beauty, not that soft, benign, European one. Under a replenishing sun. Right now I'm like a plant turning towards the light, drinking it up. I've found my place in the world, blazing contentment and revelling in the gift of belonging – and growing up.

It's called home.

By now you should have already selected and have analysed, the pieces of writing you have found that contain good ideas on the concept of belonging. In the exam, in your response to the question, you will be able to refer to these pieces and, and provide examples from the texts to support your views.

This article, 'The Long Way Home' by Nikki Gemmell, is an additional related text that is good for analysis and deconstruction. Just as you did with the related texts you have already selected, in this article look for:

- any ideas of belonging, and

- the techniques the writer uses to portray the concept of belonging.

...you could discuss the imagery for example, like the iconic images such as the Kookaburra on the Hills clothes hoist, that show the identification of her connectedness with her home and a sense of belonging.