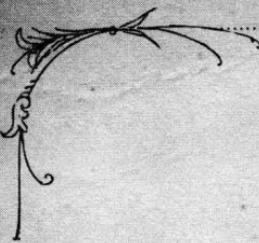


A
Girl
Like
Me

PENNY MATTHEWS





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PENGUIN BOOKS

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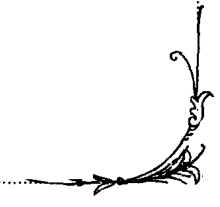
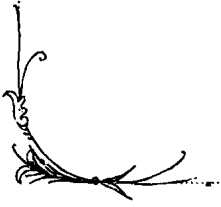


PENGUIN BOOKS

A Girl Like Me

Penny Matthews is a writer and freelance editor based in Adelaide. She has written picture books (among them the award-winning *A Year On Our Farm*), chapter books and junior novels. *A Girl Like Me* is her first young adult novel.

Penny grew up on her family's farm near the South Australian township of Eden Valley, about 30 kilometres from the even smaller settlement of Towitta where *A Girl Like Me* is set. She first heard the story of Bertha Schippan as a child and it has captivated her imagination ever since.




In memory of Johanne Elizabeth (Bertha) Schippan

16 JANUARY 1888 - 2 JANUARY 1902



Prelude

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with a small circle at the left end, from which a series of curved lines and leaf-like shapes extend to the right, ending in a small circle.

IT WAS FATHER who gave me the news that Queen Victoria had died. I knew he was about to tell me something important because he put his hand on my shoulder, and it was rare for him to touch me. I was sweeping the kitchen courtyard: the air was full of dust, and the sun was burning hot on my hair.

The Queen's death was not unexpected. She had been ill for some time, and the newspaper reports cabled from England had been increasingly gloomy. Then at last came the message everybody dreaded: *Queen Victoria has ceased to live*. Nobody wanted to say 'died', that awful final word.

I tried to feel sad, but her death didn't move me as much as I had expected it might. She had been on the throne for so long that she seemed almost like a member of the family, perhaps a rather formidable great-aunt, but I cannot say that I loved her. And to die at eighty-one is scarcely a tragedy, after all. But my parents felt her death keenly. My mother wept when she heard the news, and she wore black for a full three months. Most of the adults we knew wore black armbands, and some of the older children too.

Black ribbons and wreaths appeared on people's front doors, and even though the school was closed for the holidays, the Union Jack in the school-yard flew at half-mast.

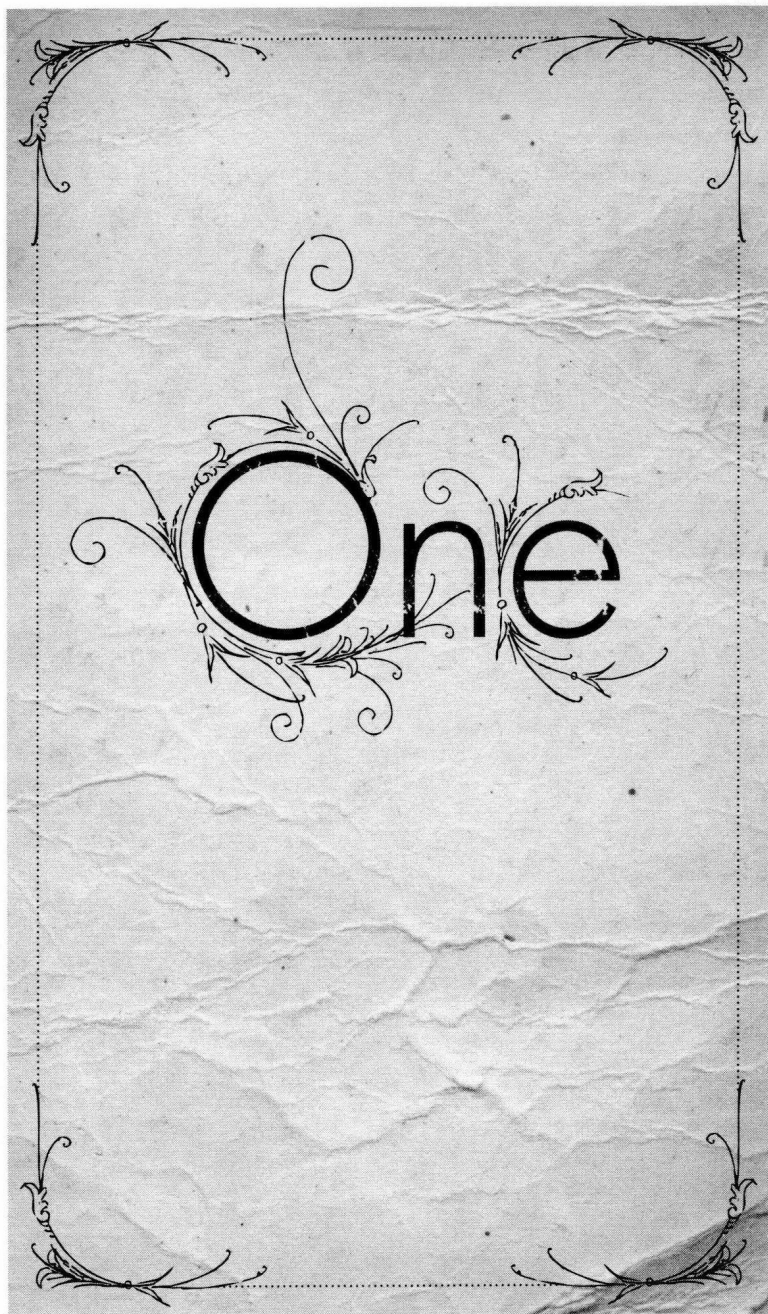
Mother put flowers beneath the portrait of the Queen in our dining room and draped the frame with black crepe swagged like curtains. Because of the swagging, the Queen looked as if she were on a stage. I imagined her giving a little wink, like Miss Flossie Abraham at the glee concert in Sedan last November, and then lifting her skirts to just above her ankles and dancing a jig. The idea of such a dignified person dancing on stage seemed very funny to me, but of course I didn't tell Mother what I was thinking. She would have considered it extremely disrespectful.

When the pictorial magazines arrived from England several months later, Mother pored over the photographs of the funeral and wept again, enough to need a handkerchief. She said, 'We shall never see another monarch like her. From all accounts King Edward is quite a rake. But of course we owe him our loyalty, because he is the King.' She put the magazines in the trunk in her bedroom, to keep, along with the white wax flowers from her wedding cake and little Lizzie's baby clothes.

I didn't know then what a rake was. Apart from a garden tool, of course, but that wasn't what Mother meant.

I remember all this respect and reverence for the Queen especially because when Bertha died, almost exactly a year later, respect and reverence were quite the last things on show. Her death became some sort of awful entertainment, and people gorged themselves on it like dogs devouring a rabbit.

By then I was sixteen, and starting to see life in a new way. But that time is so vivid to me now that it seems as though I am living through it still.



*Girls are not apt to understand the evils of
novel-reading... but the wise mother understands
the effects of sensational reading upon the physical
organization, and wishes to protect her daughter
from the evils thus produced.*

MARY WOOD-ALLEN,
What A Young Woman Ought to Know, p 124.



‘I’M GOING TO write a novel,’ I say.

It is a Sunday late in August 1901. We are having afternoon tea in the drawing room – scones and jam, and little iced cupcakes, and Anna Noske’s fruit cake. My mother has put out the best bone china and the silver apostle spoons. Her guests, Mrs Evans and Mrs King, are sitting together on the horsehair sofa. Mrs Evans is plump and Mrs King is thin, but you can tell they are sisters because they have the same pointy noses and small dark eyes. Mrs Evans’s eyes twinkle in quite a friendly sort of way, but Mrs King’s are like little black stones. Mrs King always looks as if life has disappointed her and she can barely cope with the misery.

The moment I say that I am going to write a novel, Mother’s neck goes bright red. It always does that when she is

upset or embarrassed. Although I didn't interrupt anybody's conversation, I can see that she thinks I am *out of order*. To say what I have just said is to attract undue attention. It is boastful and immodest, and probably untrue as well. But before Mother can say anything, Mrs Evans puts down her teacup and smiles at me.

'That's very ambitious of you, Emmie,' she says. 'What sort of a novel, dear?'

It's my turn to blush. I am quite used to being ignored, and I hadn't really expected anyone to take up my remark.

'I'm not sure,' I say. 'A romance, I suppose.'

Mrs King gives a sour little laugh. 'And you'd know about such a thing, Emmie, at your age?'

Suddenly I feel quite foolish, and very hot. It is unseasonably warm, and I am sweating inside my new navy bombazine dress. I wish I'd pinned handkerchiefs under my arms, as Mother instructed me earlier. But I manage to collect my thoughts. 'Of course I don't, Mrs King,' I reply. I know to be especially polite to disappointed people because they can turn their disappointment back on you in a most unkind way. 'At least, not personally. But I have read a great many novels since I left school. In just these last two weeks I have read *Ivanhoe* and *Kenilworth* and *Lorna Doone*. I love *Lorna Doone*, but my favourite book of all is *Wuthering Heights*. I have read it three times now.'

'I have never read it,' says Mrs Evans, in a bright, interested voice, 'although I have heard of it, of course. I believe it is very *dramatic*.'

'I don't have time to read,' sniffs Mrs King. 'There are far more important things to do on a farm.'

'Indeed there are,' says Mother. She frowns a warning at me.

'This is just a passing fancy of Emmie's, I am sure.'

'You are only fifteen, dear,' says Mrs Evans. 'Aren't you a little young to be thinking of writing a novel?'

'Or indeed of romance?' adds Mrs King, smirking. She exchanges a brief look with Mrs Evans, and then they both look back at me. I can see them weighing me up. *Tall for her age*, they are thinking. *No figure yet to speak of. Nice hair: thick, and not too bad a colour. Fresh complexion. A pity her eyes are not blue: her mother has such beautiful blue eyes. Quite intelligent, but away with the fairies most of the time.* (This is a favourite expression of Mrs King's.) *Most unpromising material for a farmer's wife.*

'A romance is really only a novel,' I explain. 'It doesn't have to be about, well, romantic things.' I'm sure that by now my face is scarlet. 'Of course *Wuthering Heights* is a love story, but it's about other things too, like chance and destiny. And revenge.'

Mrs King looks bored. Mrs Evans picks up the last of the little iced cakes, leaving just the embroidered doily on the plate, and a few crumbs. 'Well, Emmie,' she says, holding the cake halfway to her lips, 'it is good to have an ambition. And I am sure you will surprise us all, one day.' She takes a bite. 'Tell me, dear, how do you like being at home? Do you wish you were still at school?'

'Oh,' I say, in my most sincere voice, 'I like being at home very much. And really I don't miss school at all. It's so good to be finished with lessons at last.'

Although I know this is what kind-hearted Mrs Evans expects to hear, it's not the truth. I would have liked nothing better than to go on with my schooling, but Mother said there was little point: she could teach me housekeeping skills, so that I should be prepared for marriage; and Mr Kluge would

continue to give me piano lessons.

Of course, if I were not a girl, things would be different. For my brothers a proper education has always been considered absolutely essential. James is eighteen and in his final year at boarding school in Adelaide, and when they are twelve my nine-year-old twin brothers, Harry and Oliver, will go to boarding school too. In my opinion this is extremely unfair, for none of my brothers has the slightest interest in learning, and the twins, especially, would rather muck out the stables than read anything that might improve their minds. In spite of this, Mother says it is important for boys to be educated so that they will be successful in life, while girls need only know how to run a household and find a husband. After labouring away at it for so many months, I feel perfectly qualified to say that there is nothing in housework that is likely to improve *anybody's* mind.

It is interesting that nobody ever worries whether or not men will marry. No matter how ugly or boring a man may be, no matter if he has tufts of hair sprouting from his ears and the fattest of fat bellies, he will still find someone perfectly willing and even eager to be his wife. Last month Jessie O'Donnell (who has the prettiest complexion and can play the harp) married yellow-eyed Alec Feeney (who looks like a dingo, but with fewer teeth), and everybody was congratulating *her*.

All this passes through my mind while with another part of me I listen to the twins shrieking with laughter outside in the garden. I wish with all my heart that I was out there playing with them in the sunshine, not sitting here in the gloomy drawing room and having to mind what I say. And then suddenly I think: Now I've told people about writing a novel.

It has stopped being my secret. That means *I have to do it*. And a little quiver of anticipation starts up in my stomach.



‘It’s the silliest idea I ever heard,’ says Ada.

Ada Hammond is my best friend. We were at school together, although she was a year ahead of me. She has come to visit from her home near Rhine Villa, and she is feeling very grown up because her parents have let her take the sulky out on her own. The Hammonds’ stocky old carriage horse, Mercury, is tied up in front of our house, his nose deep in his nosebag.

Ada is beautiful, with wheat-coloured hair and big dark eyes, just like the girls in the Lux soap advertisements. She has a tiny waist, and is very proud of it. Right now she has got it down to nineteen inches, but it is an effort for her to keep it there because she loves eating sweets. She smells deliciously of Attar of Roses and musk cachous.

We are pretending to be ladies, sitting in the rattan garden chairs on the front lawn and drinking lemonade. Harry and Oliver have finally left us alone and gone off to play soldiers: both of them follow the war in South Africa with great enthusiasm, and they take turns to be a brave Australian rifleman and a crafty Boer rebel. Whenever Ada visits they behave like puppies, alternately drooling and misbehaving. It is extraordinary the effect female beauty has on boys, even the youngest of them. I have had to promise them that in exchange for their leaving us in peace I will help them with their spelling homework, and that is a great nuisance, for I want to begin writing my novel straight away.

The sun shines through the leaves of the spindly lilac tree behind us, and in the dappled shade you can almost not notice that the grass is already patchy and dry, even though it is still some months to summer. We have to keep moving our feet to avoid the bull ants that emerge from the cracked earth and run everywhere.

'I can't believe you really want to write a novel,' Ada continues, 'and I don't see how you will do it. To begin with, what would you write about?'

'How can you have so little faith in me?' I ask. 'I'm sure it won't be very difficult. It's not as if you have to pass an examination.' I am rather annoyed, although really I should have expected nothing more from Ada. She is six months older than I am, and likes to lord it over me a little.

'Well, look at the facts.' Ada counts on her fingers. 'One: nothing ever happens here in Towitta. Two: you have never travelled further away than Adelaide, and you've only been *there* half a dozen times. Three: you have never had a romance, or none that I know of, although I suspect that you are rather keen on Frank Cousins —'

'Frank Cousins!' I say, horrified. 'He smells like cheese! And his hair is so horrid — like a dog's! You know perfectly well that all we ever did was throw inkballs at each other.'

'And four,' continues Ada, ignoring my protests, 'you are only fifteen, and novels are always written about men and women, and you are not one — a woman, I mean.'

I stamp my foot hard to rid it of an encroaching bull ant, but also to show Ada what I think of her. 'Ada,' I say, 'that's complete nonsense. I've read enough books to know *exactly* what it's like to be a woman. You think you're grown up, but you are still months away from wearing your hair up.'

'Ah, Emmie, but I *am* sixteen,' is her infuriating reply. 'And you forget that I have had at least some experience of romance.'

'With James. Who is scarcely a man, even if this is his last year at school. And the romance was all in your head. I'm quite sure that James doesn't give a single fig for you.' I duck as she flings a cushion at my head, and the glass I am holding slops lemonade on my skirt.

'You deserved that.' Ada smooths back her hair, which is already as smooth and shining as polished wood. 'And I still say you cannot write a novel. Or not a proper one.'

'And what is a proper novel?' I retort. 'You only like reading cheap awful stuff like *A Rose in Bloom* and *The Wilful Willoughbys* – and they are entertainments, not proper novels.'

'They are what most people like to read. And what on earth is the point of a novel that people don't want to read?'

'Well, you may be right about that,' I say reluctantly. 'But how much greater is a novel that moves your soul? I know you haven't read *Wuthering Heights*, but you should, Ada, really you should. It's all about the sort of people we shall never meet – dramatic, strange, interesting people. The main character, Heathcliff, is so mysterious and so . . . so *passionate*. He's really more a villain than a hero, but he suffers so terribly when he loses his soul-mate that you forgive him the dreadful way he treats people. In the end it's impossible not to fall a little in love with him, even though you almost hate him at the same time. No, *not* like Frank Cousins.' I scowl: my friend's expression has just become insufferably knowing. 'And the atmosphere is so romantic! It is all darkness and deep tragedy. That is the sort of novel I want to write.'

Ada sips her lemonade. 'We don't know any strange, dramatic and whatever-else-you-said people. And our lives are not deep tragedies. Why shouldn't we read about the sort of people we actually know? Ordinary people like us?'

'Where's the interest in that?' I ask. 'Who would want to read about people like us?'

'People like me, I suppose,' replies Ada. She puts her empty glass carefully on the rickety rattan table, pauses, and says, 'Did you know that it's only ninety-nine days to the Christmas school holidays?'

'Why should we care?' I reply. 'We no longer have school holidays.' With Ada I don't even try to disguise my bitterness and the sense of loss I feel. I loved being at school. I loved our little square schoolroom with its faded maps and charts, its chalk-misted blackboard, its smoky fire in winter. I loved writing essays, even if they were only on babyish topics like 'A day in the life of a penny', and talking to Mr Morphett about books was the greatest joy. He told me once that he was sure I would write a novel one day, and his casual remark warmed my heart like a tiny secret flame.

I smile now at the memory.

Ada's voice breaks into my reverie. 'I expect James will be coming home,' she says. 'Why are you smiling?'

'James?' I say, for I am still thinking of my kindly teacher. 'Yes, I expect so.' And then I notice a pink flush on Ada's cheeks. 'Aha,' I say. 'It is only ninety-nine days till *James* comes home. That's why it's important to you, isn't it? You can't wait to see dear *James* again.'

At this point the twins, who have sneaked back from exile and are now hiding unsuccessfully behind the lilac tree, begin to chant, 'Ada loves Ja-ames, Ada loves Ja-ames' in an