

As a philosophy teacher, Lenny Robinson-McCarthy and her students grapple with life's big questions on a daily basis. Who are we? Why are we here? What is right and what is wrong?

But this deep thinker is certainly not immune to the less philosophical questions faced by all parents, such as, "How do you find time to teach, write books and care for a four-year-old?"

"You never feel like you're doing any job well enough," Robinson-McCarthy concedes during a rare break in the grand old 19th century former orphanage that is now part of Preshil, The Margaret Lyttle Memorial School.

"At three o'clock yesterday afternoon I was talking about Nietzsche's book *The Genealogy of Morality*. At six o'clock I was cutting gingerbread out on my table at home. At 7.30 I was listening to a reader. At 9pm I was reading Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*."

Not that she's complaining. Robinson-McCarthy, who grew up on a Gippsland dairy farm, loves every minute of her crazy-busy life.

"When I think about it, my life is really rich and wonderful," she says, eating the breakfast she won't have time for if she doesn't get to it now. "I feel that my life is meaningful, and that's all you can ever ask."

Robinson-McCarthy's journey from a 50-hectare dairy farm six kilometres outside Leongatha to respected creative writer and one of Victoria's premier VCE philosophy authorities has been fascinating but not without a few road humps.

Philosophy was the last thing on her mind growing up with brothers Lance, now 38, and Lincoln, 32. Their father, Ian, left school at 12 and mother, Gwen, at 14. Both developed their own special talents, but there was no intellectual or political chat around the dinner table.

Instead Robinson-McCarthy, now 39, enjoyed the freedom of a farm, read every book she could find and made her own fun, which she believes helped her develop as a creative writer.

"I adored the freedom of it, of being able to just roam paddocks," she says. "I really love nature and I feel at peace in the country. I think it was a place where I could be a child longer than I perhaps could have been if I'd grown up in the city. We made a lot of imaginary worlds and things like that. When I became a teenager, I found it a lot more limiting."

Robinson-McCarthy attended Leongatha primary and high schools, walking a kilometre to the bus stop each morning. She was relatively rebellious at high school but made friends with the principal's daughter and learnt about the possibilities of university.

While her parents were happy for her to leave school and marry a farmer, Robinson-McCarthy's late year 12 co-ordinator, Bob Crouch, and other teachers believed in her and offered encouragement.

Also a dancer, Robinson-McCarthy studied arts at Monash University and majored in fiction writing and literature. For the first year she lived with her maternal grandmother, Mary O'Brien, who was full of encouragement.

University was challenging after being a big fish in a small pond. But the determined young student thrived on the intellectual challenge and was captivated by women's studies. She also wrote short stories and her work has appeared in publications such as *Overland* and *Best Australian Essays 2012*.

After graduating, Robinson-McCarthy wanted to write full time and waited tables to make ends meet. At 24, she met husband Greg McCarthy, who was a café customer and worked in production at nearby Mushroom Records. He is now a carpenter.

A GOOD QUESTION

EDUCATION \ This teacher has a philosophical approach to life, writes CHERYL CRITCHLEY

They moved to Sydney so McCarthy could work for Sony, but eight weeks before Robinson-McCarthy was due to start a master of teaching at the University of Sydney he had a life-threatening motorbike accident.

Facing lengthy rehabilitation, they returned to Melbourne and Robinson-McCarthy completed a diploma of education at the University of Melbourne. Before then, she had flirted with teaching, applying several times before pulling out.

"Each time I got the acceptance letter I went, 'No I'm not cut out to be a teacher, I'm not the right personality, it's not going to suit me,'" she says. For once, this confident and intelligent young woman was wrong.

Robinson-McCarthy loved her teaching rounds and knew immediately that she could do it. She had a natural affinity for working in front of a class and relished the challenge of engaging teenagers.

After applying for a literature teaching job at Preshil, she won the job but was instead asked to teach the new VCE philosophy subject, which started in 2001. Despite brushing up on the subject over summer, that first year was "incredibly difficult" because teachers largely drove the course.

But Robinson-McCarthy took the bull by the horns, developing an engaging and vigorous program while studying for her honours. She also spent six years on a PhD exploring literary philosophy at Deakin University.

"It was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," she says. "I never knew if I was the most brilliant person that ever walked the face of the earth or if I was going to fail."

Never one to slow down, Robinson McCarthy discovered she was pregnant with Ruby Rose, now four, as she finished the PhD. She went straight into writing a small history book on 19th century Melbourne brothel owner Caroline Hodgson, known as Madame Brussels.

"The whole nine months of my pregnancy I wrote *Madame Brussels* and in fact I wrote the last chapter in labour," she says. "It was due and I was determined to finish that book before I gave birth."

"I had 12 hours. I was at home for most of it. My editor and I were talking on the phone and I just remember the last phone call having contractions and having to stop and go, 'Sorry, this is the last bit that you're going to get, I can't keep writing,' and hung up."

Robinson-McCarthy took a year off after having Ruby Rose, who now attends Preshil's early learning centre. She continued to write, publishing a year 11 philosophy text with Anna Symes in 2010, *Philosophy*:



a student text for VCE units 1 & 2. They are updating it and planning a year-12 version.

VCE philosophy wasn't introduced until 2001, but Robinson-McCarthy, who also teaches postgraduate writing at Deakin University and works in philosophy assessment and curriculum development with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, believes it helps to prepare students for life.

Philosophy fits well with Preshil's aim to produce independent thinkers. It is a deliberately small school founded by Margaret Jane Ruth Lyttle in the 1930s and run by her niece, also Margaret Lyttle, for 50 years. Both were passionate advocates of progressive education.

Pondering life's big questions is natural for teenagers, particularly those encouraged to think for themselves. But how do you interest them in the likes of Socrates, Plato, Descartes and Nietzsche? Robinson-McCarthy insists it is not hard if you create a framework and keep the questions basic.

"Philosophy shouldn't be a dry subject," she explains. "Questions like, 'What is right?' and 'What is wrong?' and 'What is the nature of reality?' and 'How should we live our lives?' and 'Is pleasure important in life?'; all of these ... are fascinating questions."

"In other subjects ... you start from your opinion and then you find ways to defend your opinion. In philosophy we look at the evidence and from there we form an opinion."

"I sometimes say to students in philosophy, 'You might find that the best answer is actually not the one you agree with', and actually being able to recognise that is the beginnings of students doing philosophy."

Preshil students have embraced the challenge, with half of last year's year 12 class scoring over 40. It has also produced two Premier's Prize-winners in the subject.

"Philosophy should be compulsory in my opinion ... it teaches young people or teaches anybody how to think, and knowing how to think is so important for how we live our lives personally," Robinson-McCarthy says. "It allows us to clearly look at the information that we are given in different parts of our lives."

"There's nothing more exciting than when a group of students walk out of your classroom and they're still talking about it when they walk out. They're still debating and they're questioning and you can see that they're on fire with the question, agreeing or disagreeing or just trying to work it out in their heads and that's when I know I'm teaching really well."

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