

# Try to keep up with Australia's fastest 9

*I thought I would come to Australia and learn to surf. Instead I le*



BARI WEISS

More precisely, I lumbered, jogged, waddled and generally humiliated my way around a track as I tried — and failed — to keep up with the world's most exceptional race walker.

That walker, Heather Lee, is 92 years old. She holds five world records and eight Australian ones for racewalking. She is the New South Wales Senior Australian of the Year. And she has big plans for 2019 — namely, breaking her own best times — so she does not kid around when it comes to working out.

Lee trains at least three days a week. Wednesdays are reserved for interval training with her coach, Liz de Vries. "I never know what horrors she has in store for me," MLee said. "But I'm turning back the clock as far as speed's concerned."

On a typical day, Lee walks at least 10,000 steps — a benefit, she said, of giving up driving. In 2018, she walked 3,057,374 steps, according to her fitness watch.

The athlete was already stretching with de Vries, a fit mother of three, when I met them at a park in Richmond, an hour outside Sydney, at 7:30 a.m. "I'm 55," de Vries told me. "And I'm one of the

few people in Richmond who can keep up with Heather."

Many older people I know are focused on the past. When they talk about the future, they are, quite understandably, preoccupied with the hassles and obstacles of their increasing age. Lee is different. When she looks ahead, it is with optimism and determination. She credits that to her sport. "I'm always looking to compete again," she said.

Race walking is hard. Trying to do it while maintaining a conversation is much harder. Fortunately Lee was less winded than me.

Before we had even made it around the first loop, she had told me about some of her favorite walks in the country (the War-rumbungle and Bungle Bungle ranges), her most recent records (she completed 10 kilometers in 84 minutes 21 seconds), World War II ("The day previous to Normandy I knew something was going on. The atmosphere was electric.") and the queen.

Lee was born on the Isle of Wight, off southern England, in 1926, the same year as Elizabeth II. "The queen's like me a bit: She's learned to change with the times," she said. "I've gone from being a snobbish Pommy to an Australian."

Lee, the younger of two sisters, played hockey and tennis, rode horses, swam and biked. She wasn't particularly academic. "My schooling was a bit interrupted by air raids and things like that," she said.

She married her first husband, whom she doesn't like to talk about, on the Isle of Wight and had a daughter. They separated in the early 1960s, when Lee was 35. She and her daughter moved to Australia a few years later. "I wanted to start a new life for myself," she said.

What about her career? "I've never been anything really special. In my latter years I worked at the post office, which I loved, by the way."

What was special was her second marriage.

Two years after arriving on the continent, she married an Australian named Leonard Lee, and by the early 1980s they'd moved to Queensland, which Lee remembers as "wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, a perfect life." They lived by the sea and had "two or three mango trees and about 23 pawpaw trees of our own." The couple would barter their fruit for fresh fish caught by their friends. For fun, they played their electric organs.

"We were two halves of a whole," Lee said of their marriage more than once during the morning.

Lee died of lung cancer in 1996, and as his wife tells it, his final words to her changed the course of her life: "Now is the time to show your mettle," he said.

"I wanted to live up to what he wanted me to be," Lee said. "It's been my creed for all these years."

She says she had always been focused on wellness and fitness



Heather Lee described her life with Leonard Lee as "perfect".

— as far back as the 1970s the Lees did cleanses, brewed their own kombucha and put lecithin on their cereal. But after her husband died, Lee said, "I had a

compulsion to walk. The faster I walked, the better I felt."

Her athletic career began in earnest a few weeks before she turned 85. In 2011, on the advice

of her physiotherapist, she competed in the Australian Master Games and ended up winning four gold medals.

"I was thrilled to bits with th

# The very rare genius of ins

*Lean in to your sleeplessness and discover its creative pot*



MARINA BENJAMIN

Insomnia usually begins with a lament, for the love (and loss) of sleep; over the re-dyed mornings and sludgelike days that tail the wakeful nights; for the rest you crave and cannot get and the cognitive snap that eludes you. Yet if we insist on viewing insomnia merely as a matter of negatives, a condition defined by lack, a nothing, a zero, a blank, then we risk missing what it can potentially reveal.

I've been insomniac all my life. As a child, my wakefulness was a matter of personal pride, a badge of honour signifying a shrewd vigilance (should any ghoulish intruder upon my bedroom by night, it would meet with a grisly fate). Yet my refusal of sleep had less to do with my fear of the dark and the monsters it bred than with everyday suspicion: I simply could not fathom where people went to in sleep. They

seemed lost to the world.

Terrified of the nullity that sleep imposed, I'd dodge the bedtime curfew each night: at lights out, a minor rebellion. Like Vladimir Nabokov (whose kindred spirit I had yet to encounter), I figured that sleep offered only a dumb conformity.

Had I not been a child, I, too, might have described it as a "nightly betrayal of reason, humanity, genius." I longed for the light of consciousness to burn throughout the dark nights.

These days, I'm less inclined to rejoice in the way my head is lit up at night, like an out-of-hours factory, when the whirring generators flip on, powering up the lights and the processing plants for a frenetic shift. Geared up this way, my mind trips ceaselessly from one mundane thought to the next, alighting upon a single word or meaningless riff or song snippet I happened to hear that day. Or it runs backward and forward over endless lists, stitching and unstitching. I compose strings of emails that could wait until morning, line up tasks in a shoulder-shoving queue. Mostly I just fret, worry-beading minor

problems and irritations until they form a manacle of woe.

Since most people are sleeping when I'm awake — their circadian rhythms in happy synchrony with the diurnal clock — my insomnia is troubled by a sense of trespass, even contamination: the illicit importing of day into night. How can one not feel somewhat soiled by it?

The proponents of "sleep hygiene" have a lot to say about contamination, too. In this sense, the obsession with sleep hygiene has a kinship with the stylised fussiness of clean eating. Its rules dictate that rather than thrashing around in bed, not sleeping, the insomniac whose mind is polluted by looping dark thoughts and sudden lurching panics (the pesticides of wakefulness) should instead get up, switch rooms, attempt to read, make lists, make tea, listen to sleep tapes, meditate but not medicate, put on fresh sleepwear and experiment with soft lighting.

In a short essay titled "Sleep, Night," published in 1955, the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot took a very different tack. Touching on the bor-

der-crossing wiliness of insomnia, he wrote: "To sleep with open eyes is an anomaly symbolically indicating something which the general consciousness does not approve of. People who sleep badly always appear more or less guilty. What do they do? They make night present." Not for Blanchot the anodyne distractions of sleep hygiene, which conspire to evade night's presence. His recommendation was that insomniacs leap into the night.

This is not always easy. Anyone who has woken from a nightmare knows that shapes and colours morph in the dark. Night has its own alphabet, too, a sensory lexicon that is manifestly "other." Lean in to insomnia and you can discern the varied granular textures of the dark. Tune in and your ears can feast on a strange nocturnal orchestration: animal, atmospheric, hydraulic, electric.

All your senses are heightened at night; everything is amplified. When you hear rustling leaves, it is as if you can pick out each individual flutter. The scurrying of small mammals offers a complex, scratchboard choreography. Lis-



ten hard along an internal regis- ter, and you sometimes pick up the pounding thud of your heart,

or a mysterious whooshing tha- swirls through your ears like miniature mistral. The cognitiv-