



FOREWORD

By Professor Loretta Baldassar

Helen Ellis has written a timely and important book; one that is relevant to everyone.

Transnational Families - or Distance Families as Ellis calls them - are families whose members are separated by geographical distance but who strive to maintain their sense of familyhood, their emotional connection, despite that distance. Anyone who has a loved one living far away knows the heartache of longing to be together, the sense of obligation to give, but also the need to receive care and support, to 'be there' for each other, despite the distance. This is what defines family (and family-like) relationships - sharing our lives together; what leading anthropologist of kinship studies Marshall Sahlins calls "a mutuality of being". A helpful way to think about this is to ask: How can we share enough of our lives across distance that we can continue to co-narrate each other's existence? Be an integral part of a joint family history?

I grew up deeply influenced by the distance and separation at the heart of my extended Italian-Australian migrant family. My great grandmother and her three children waited 12 long years in Italy in the 1920s and 30s to be reunited with my great grandfather who migrated to

Australia, and they only had letters and the occasional message from fellow migrants to keep them connected. They weren't alone in this experience; women like my great grandmother became known as the 'white widows' - their husbands were still alive, so they didn't wear black, but the absence of their menfolk made their everyday social life akin to widowhood.

I was very close to my maternal grandmother and through her I learnt about this experience of 'distance' family life. A story firmly planted in my mind is of the day she re-met her dad at the Port of Fremantle, Western Australia, aged 14 years; a man she hadn't seen since she was two years old. I was fascinated by how this family managed to stay together despite the enormous geographical distance and excruciatingly long physical absence. How did they make it work?

My own father migrated from Italy in the 1950s, leaving behind his parents and all his siblings and extended family. I grew up getting to know them through letters, postcards, and strictly timed (expensive) monthly phone calls. These routine practices of staying in touch were punctuated by cherished rituals of gift exchange at Christmas and birthdays. Then there was the long-anticipated and much-valued visit of my paternal grandmother when I was six years old, followed six years later by our first family visit to the homeland. The experience of spending time together in person was one of heightened emotions; a special time that impressed on me the significance of visits in distance family life.

Like the family of my grandparents, these distance families have always existed, but their experiences have been largely overlooked in the past. Today, there are increasing numbers - and diverse types - of families who are 'making it work' despite the challenges of distance and absence.

Ellis's book provides us with a wealth of informed and practical advice, drawing on knowledge from actual distance family experiences, including her own incisive reflections on her own experiences. There is much to learn from the families who have themselves been managing the challenges of distance and absence. These valuable insights are relevant to all of us. Once the preserve of migrants and refugees, more and more people are experiencing first-hand what it is like to be physically separated from loved ones and constrained by physical distancing, mobility lockdowns and border closures.

Ellis's book - full of heartfelt accounts and rich narratives - provides a much-needed guide to navigating these challenges for all generations. Ellis is deeply attuned to the practices and processes, opportunities and constraints, of lives lived across borders. The experiences of distance families highlight in particular the important role of media and communication technologies, and the importance of digital literacy and access, and raise compelling questions about new ways of doing and being with family. They also heighten our awareness of the impact of migration and social policy on the wellbeing of distance families, in particular the challenges of increasingly restrictive and temporary migration pathways that limit the capacity for families to be reunited.

Ellis's book is full of creativity, empathy, understanding, openness and, most importantly, ideas. It shines a light on what it means to be a distance grandparent and in so doing creates and uncovers this important social identity, holding it up for us to examine, so that we can take

a close look - add it to our everyday language - see ourselves reflected in it and in so doing, better understand what it means to do and be family in today's world.

Professor Loretta Baldassar

Loretta Baldassar is Professor in the Discipline Group of Anthropology and Sociology at The University of Western Australia (UWA) and Director of the UWA Social Care and Ageing (SAGE) Living Lab. She has published extensively on transnational mobility, with a particular focus on families and caregiving across the life course. Her publications include *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care* (with Merla, 2014); *Families Caring Across Borders* (with Baldock & Wilding, 2007); *Intimacy and Italian Migration* (with Gabaccia, 2011); and the award-winning book, *Visits Home* (MUP 2001). Baldassar is Vice President of the International Sociological Association, Migration Research Committee (31) and a Regional Editor for the leading journal *Global Networks*. Professor Baldassar was recently named one of the top 30 Australian researchers in the Social Sciences, and Research Field Leader in Human Migration (*The Australian*, 23 September 2020).

Loretta is a distance granddaughter, niece, cousin, and close friend.