



Abby Rees

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

By Lisa Finn Powell

The first time I met Abby Rees was in a Zoom meeting. She has one of those larger-than-life personalities that somehow allowed her that day to quite easily transcend the gap in the ether, between computers, through wires and cables, across signals and networks, making me feel like I was right there in the room with her in a front row seat! She was a bundle of energy with a huge smile framed in bright pink lippy. She had that 'room' instantly entranced as she delivered her message of positivity, growth and empowerment!

When I later asked her to describe what it was that she 'did', she said, "Technically, what I DO is coaching, facilitation and culture change. But, honestly within each of these elements, what I really do is create spaces that facilitate people to think differently, deeply, to see what was previously invisible, to question it and to redesign it."

Through her award-winning (she won Altitude Award's Changemaker category in 2020) coaching and facilitation business PunkPD, she uses two primary skills: making visible the invisible experience of being human and synthesising complex information quickly. This enables her to work across a range of fields and understand the complexities quickly. "This allows me to continue to learn and integrate new information into what I am doing" she explained, "I never facilitate the same content in the same way. It's always growing, expanding!"

Her goal is to help people to make incredibly powerful changes in their own lives. She says it's like "turning the spotlight onto the subconscious and getting a good look at all the silent elements orchestrating so much of our lives". She goes on to explain that these unconscious drivers are "ugly little buggers" and often they are "gifts" from other people. "When we can see these things, understand our habits of thought, how we make meaning, the meaning we attach to our perceptions, we are in an incredibly powerful place for change and conscious living."



What's really compelling about Abby is that she walks the walk! In spite of some serious obstacles in a very challenging upbringing, she has managed to create a very successful and joyful life of learning and growing. She has earned multiple degrees, diplomas and qualifications and thus calls herself an "education junkie"! And even more impressive than that is a skill that she attributes to a lifelong learning curve, which is to be conscious of her own narrative.

"By this I mean how we frame stories or events to others and to ourselves- what meaning are we attaching to things? What is the construct of our identity? How we narrate our ourselves? For in creating our narrative, we either step towards or away from our own power and our own choices.

And this has developed over the course of my life. Sure, my life has been incredibly hard and painful in parts. But it's also, and not always at different times, been incredibly beautiful. It depends on which I emphasise when I tell you or tell myself the story. The most important bit for me is that it's all just a story. What matters is what I've done with it."

She does have a little bug-bear which she tenderly calls "pain porn", describing it as the way in which some people find it so much easier to bond and connect over sharing pain-based stories. *My husband always... I'm so tired... I never have the time...* and how we tend to socially reward and praise this. *Oh, I know what you mean... Me too.*

"When I circle way above these seemingly little interactions, I am bewildered by how unhealthy this is," Rees said. "It's like we're encouraging people to create unhealthy dynamics in their lives, praising them for maintaining them and allowing exhaustion, busyness, and a sub-par existence to be social badges. This occurs in friendships as well as organisations, and has some pretty horrendous cumulative impacts."

Her ideal would be to flip that culture so that we instead bond over what went right...a cool choice you made, a moment where you really felt connection, a boss who did something brave, an award that you really want to celebrate (instead of downplaying to make yourself more socially acceptable).

"I'm no Pollyanna, but I am very drawn to people who speak in empowered ways and amplify the helpful and productive parts of their world, those who look for the lessons in the dirt, pick them out, dust them off and keep going. That's why I love Women with Altitude-so empowering!"

On what International Women's Day means to her, she explained that it is a great reminder and opportunity for women to check their narrative! "Are we controlling the narrative or is it being controlled for us? What narratives or norms are we reinforcing through our own behaviours and habits that we really don't want to anymore? For example, being the one carrying the 'mental load' for the household or being the 'nice' boss.



Are we, even in the way we talk about our own bodies, reinforcing that our value is in our looks or that we are supposed to look a certain way to be worthwhile or desirable? While I am conscious of this throughout the year, IWD amplifies this focus for me and I dig deeper with myself and with my friends and those close to me. Are we putting our focus into who we are and how we contribute? Are we designing and reinforcing a new normal? In our own minds, in our narrative with others, with the material we choose to consume (marketing, social media, books, etc.), with the stories we share with our kids, in responding to the flippant comments from others? Are we conscious about what we are telling the world about who we are?"

I contemplate these questions as they land softly. I want to tuck them under my arm, grab a cup of tea and find a quiet place to sit with them, turning each one over in my hand, having a closer look, making sure to take in all of the detail so I can find a way to implement them into my own life.

This is Abby Rees' International Women's Day gift to us.

But, as a self-described "rebel thinker and arbitrary rule breaker" she has one final tip, a rule for life that she swears by:

For an effervescent life, keep your thoughts fearless, your emotions constructive and your actions venturesome!"

I'm writing that one on the bathroom mirror in bright pink lippy!



Connect with Abby Rees

