

Julia Gillard's memoir treads a careful path through her time in power



No whitewash: Julia Gillard tackles leadership tensions with Kevin Rudd very early in her book. *Photo: Justin McManus*

MEMOIR

My Story

JULIA GILLARD

KNOPF, \$49.99

Given its anodyne title and the glam picture of the author on a white-and-gold cover, *My Story* looks dismayingly like a standard celeb autobiography – almost literally a political whitewash. The cover is not accurate: Julia Gillard's memoir is interesting, thought-provoking and unexpectedly candid.

The book is not a full record of her life so far: much of that material has already been covered in her biography in any case. Although she does allude to aspects of her youth and childhood, this is her account of life at the highest levels of politics, from her becoming deputy Prime Minister in 2007 to her departure from parliament just over a year ago, in September 2013.

No whitewash: Julia Gillard tackles leadership tensions with Kevin Rudd very early in her book. *Photo: Justin McManus*

At more than 450 pages plus references and index this is a long book, but then Gillard has a lot of ground to cover. (Those who marvel at her speed in putting it together should take a look at the acknowledgments.) The first section, *How I Did It* deals with her ascent to the Prime Ministership and the pressures of her time in the job; the much longer *Why I Did It* section describes in some detail her policies, achievements and what she sees as her legacy.

She tackles the issues that dogged her whole time in office – the leadership tensions and the problems of Kevin Rudd – very early. This part of the book is written with great care, for she has to tread a fine line between being seen as a backstabber and feminist martyr. She manages pretty well, mostly by citing evidence of Rudd's behaviour, allowing the facts about his chaotic management style and its consequences to speak for themselves, and describing her colleagues' experiences as well as her own.

Gillard is evasive about what was said during the crucial conversation with Rudd on the night she challenged him as PM, and not at all about his "relentless malice" and desire for revenge. Nor does she back away from succinct and unsparing comment about his personality: "It appeared that there was a hole in him that had to be filled by success and the poor substitute for love that is political homage."

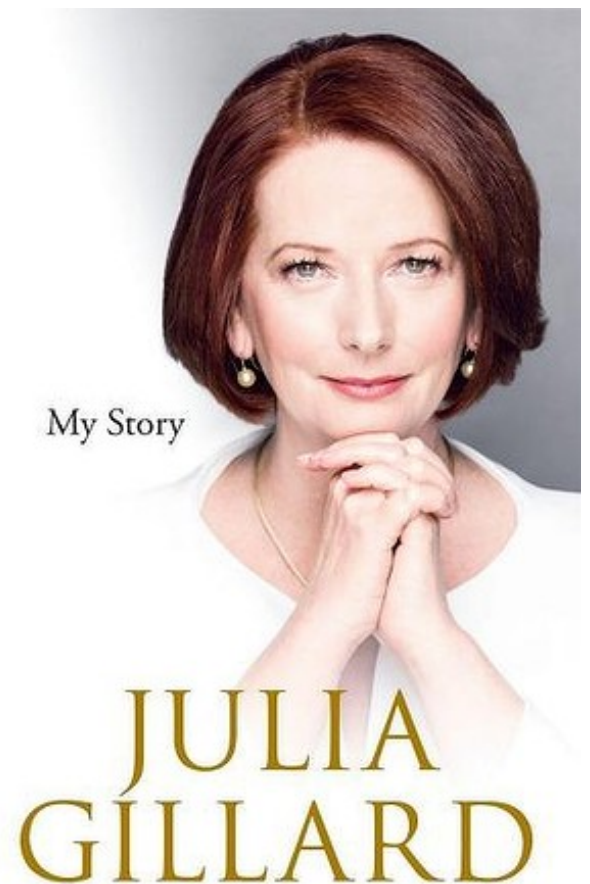
Thought-provoking: *My Story*, by Julia Gillard.

She spends little time on the electorate's perception of all this, preferring to emphasise the need to keep going and plan for the future. This neatly encapsulates her whole approach to political life: don't dwell on the past, work out what has to come next, don't worry too much about public perception. This is Gillard the doer, the solver of problems, the fixer, and in most of the book she takes centre stage. The rest of the book describes the policies and initiatives that she carried out during her three years as Prime Minister, what she calls her purpose, her achievements in its pursuit and her failures. Government, Gillard says, is like driving the Queen Mary, huge and powerful though not agile, and the art of being PM is in using the weight of government to plough through the difficult bits. She clearly takes pride in her resilience and staying power, as seen in the impressive amount of legislation she got through parliament in the teeth of opposition from several quarters.

But though this part of the book is clearly very close to her heart, the interest dips somewhat for the general reader. She discusses large and vital issues of statecraft – the drive to modernise the economy, Australia's place in the world, education and jobs growth, protection of the environment, management of the budget – but here her writing becomes more general, less focused.

There's a bit too much about making Australia stronger and fairer and governing for today while steering the nation towards a stronger tomorrow, some of which is uncomfortably reminiscent of her speeches as PM, when her words were serviceable rather than inspiring.

So it's nice when Gillard lets herself off the leash a bit. She's good on foreign affairs, especially in Asia, and she has some good thumbnail portraits of world leaders. There's her easy rapport with President Obama and jokes about Vegemite and President Karzai of Afghanistan inquiring how things are going in Uruzgan province, with her acid



though unvoiced riposte that perhaps he should have been the one telling her. There's a chilling glimpse of realpolitik in action with Vladimir Putin's comment that "Libya is Barack's". We also have Angela Merkel's forthrightness and unsuspected sense of humour and David Cameron mimicking Gillard's Australian accent, a classic example of a Brit putdown.

Not surprisingly, she does not dwell on her bad decisions and missteps and sometimes, as in the case of her asylum seeker and gay marriage policies, she seems not to understand why certain actions were perceived as errors. At the same time, she does admit to mistakes: making a fetish of the budget surplus, failing to clear up confusion about her climate-change policy, allowing the opposition to get away with lies and sloganeering.

But true to her policy of tying knots and going on, she rarely explains why some of these things happened – nor does she seem fully to comprehend how much her choice of language at various times might have influenced perception of what she was trying to say.

But when Gillard tackles the question of misogyny and its effect on her Prime Ministership her writing style serves her well. The account of her famous speech in October 2012 is angry, clear and forensically effective. She is restrained in discussing her own treatment at the hands of the media and the opposition, but occasionally drops in jolting examples of the disrespect she had to endure as the only woman in various rooms: for instance being described by the Chair of the Minerals Council as "the current Prime Minister of Australia" and not being offered a drink, though every man in the room was given one. The list of incidents she cites, large and small, is telling indeed.

She does hold Rudd responsible for many of her difficulties, first for leaving such a mess behind him, and second for his "treachery" over the three years of her Prime Ministership. At the end, facing defeat, she says she was appalled that they would desert what she calls "the Labor project" to follow the man they loathed. The fact that she does not dwell on this shows, I think, that the circumstances of her defeat are understandably still very raw.

It's easy to believe that the self-possessed, reserved and fiercely self-controlled Gillard found difficulty in writing about her feelings as fully as she does. She emphasises the importance of resilience and a sense of purpose in political life – one suspects that this is for the benefit of any young women who might be considering a political career. Her writing is clear, logical, and refreshingly free of self pity and self-justification.

In its juxtaposition of large events and small piquant details, *My Story* is an honest and compelling account of what life is like at the highest political levels: Gillard is an engaging and incisive guide.

A new edition of Jacqueline Kent's biography, *The Making of Julia Gillard*, will be published by Penguin in November.