I don’t know when I’ve read a more self-absorbed book than *Cecilia: an ex-nun’s extraordinary journey* by Cecilia Inglis.

This is the memoir of a not particularly remarkable life, told with sincerity, sentiment but little wit or real imagination. Cecilia Cahill was fifteen, the youngest of a large catholic family, when she had the vocation to enter the religious life. The vocation is not really explained satisfactorily:

A person was called by God to give their life to His service. Vocations were serious stuff. They were real and had to be followed, even if you would rather have been doing something else. Religious vocations, it was quite clear, were a privilege, not optional.

But what was it? Was it a vague sort of feeling, or a dream, or a voice heard in the night? Whatever it was that made such a strong impression on this very impressionable 15 year old, it is not made real to a reader who has not shared the experience.

Cecilia was a nun for 30 years. She was happy enough with the vows of poverty and chastity, but had trouble with the obedience – well, 2 out of 3 ain’t bad, I suppose. But, although it was several years before she was allowed to take her permanent vows, and they were even postponed for six months because the Superior wasn’t sure she was suitable, she knuckled under, perhaps for the very reason that she wasn’t accepted readily and was too proud to give up her cherished vocation. Life in the convent had its compensations, but it sounds
more like a girls boarding school than a community of responsible adults. There were many petty acts of disobedience – talking to the gardener during the Silence, midnight feasts, sleeping late – all in terror of discovery by the Superior. The image of 3 middle-aged women at 5.30 am. wondering whether to wake their room-mate, ill and trying to sleep off powerful drugs, because if they don’t ‘she’ll only get into trouble again,’ is one that I find deeply disturbing.

Cecilia finally decides to leave the convent after years of suppressed discontent manifesting itself as various illnesses, mental and physical. She is 47 years old, and decides to live in Sydney, looking for work and a husband. It’s a strain – she even has a minor brush with the law for shoplifting. But eventually she finds a teaching job – she is, after all, an experienced teacher and school counsellor despite her lack of experience in dealing with money and men. And eventually, through a series of encounters with all sorts of unsuitable men, all arranged through various introduction services, she meets the perfect man, a widower, whom she marries and they all live happily ever after.

Cecilia becomes a professional psychologist, with a Masters from Sydney University. However, there is no sense in this book of an intellectual pilgrimage. We are told she is an intelligent person: she was bright at school, apparently, kept down by some repressive nuns but ‘having her mind expanded by listening to’ other nuns ‘read stuff like T.S. Eliot’. But her university studies were just part of the labour and trial of her early secular life in Sydney. She doesn’t describe having been intellectually stretched or making any friendships at university – her social life all seemed to depend on her young housemates, and the hit-and-miss of blind dates. And she is so proud of herself for just managing to deal with life – ‘Not bad for an ex-nun,’ she comments
triumphantly after rejecting an indecent proposition from a prospective housemate.

In her acknowledgements she mentions her writing group, and a weekend workshop on ‘Writing Life Stories’. There are several tell-tale ‘creative writing’ episodes. There are at least 2 tedious ‘days-in-the-life’ – one on her 18th and one on her 66th birthday. There are one-page vignettes from childhood tastefully dotted about, on grey-tinted pages. But there is too much sentimentality and not enough objective self-examination, and at 360 pages this book is far too long.