

The story of being human

Author Ramona Koval's quest into man's condition is a surprisingly optimistic journey

BARRY REYNOLDS

RAMONA Koval loves a quest. In her previous book, *Bloodhound: Searching for my Father*, the former Radio National presenter went in search of her own origins; in her latest, *A Letter to Layla*, she goes in search of our human origins.

Koval, most familiar as the voice on the Radio National programs *Books and Writing* and *The Book Show*, has also written numerous books and provided introductions to re-releases of Australian classics as well as being a respected guest presenter at book festivals around the world.

In *A Letter to Layla*, Koval, who started her working life as a microbiologist and geneticist, gives both sides of her intellect a run in a search for our origins as *Homo sapiens* to find out why we are the only mammals to ask that question: Why?

Koval is by nature an optimist but with five grandchildren under 15, she is naturally concerned with the world they are about to inherit and so set off on a journey to understand the human condition by going back to its origins and report back to her youngest grandchild.

"Using this child was just a kind of accident of history because I was interested in making sure I wasn't writing about my family," Koval says.

In *Bloodhound*, Koval set out to find a father after deciding the man who was married to her mother could not possibly be related. No spoilers here about the result of that search, but the book did not meet with universal approval within the family.

"That was kind of tricky," she says of the reaction. "There were a few sensitivities closer to home, so I had to negotiate that. Although I was enough of a hard arse to insist that what I wanted to tell had to be told.

"It's funny that people never object to what you think they're going to object to, they always object to something you had no idea was an issue.

"Life takes over and new crises happen in families and everyone pulls together — and who can remember what Ramona wrote in that other book five years ago.

"I decided that I was going to write a book that didn't have anything to do with family. Then I find myself writing about the human family, all of our families."

Despite the specific title of the new book, Koval does not expect any jealousies among the other grandchildren.

"As each of them is born, there is a new person added on (to the dedications page) and I explained that Layla hadn't had anything to do with any of these other books. Then I said, also each one of you is mentioned in the book — and I checked to make sure. So, I think they'll be fine now."

I'M ALWAYS INTERESTED IN HUMAN BEINGS AND THE WAY THEY BEHAVE

THE research and most of the writing of *A Letter to Layla* was completed before the pandemic, allowing Koval to travel to meet scientists, visiting such places as Georgia, in the former USSR, and California for "a festival against death".

"Having been a journalist for a long time, I just know that it's so much better to see the person you're talking to, to observe what's around them, how they behave, all the things people do when they're not directly talking

to you, all things that give you colour. But also, I just like to go places and see things I haven't seen before. I'm always interested in human beings and the way they behave. I think it's a combination of sort of digging into the heart of things and observing this strange creature who is so much like other kinds of creatures, like the apes, but has come a long, long way. Why, what's the difference?"

Koval, though, is ever hopeful about what humans are capable of, despite being the daughter of Holocaust survivors and knowing "about the horrors that people can inflict on one another".

"That basically teaches you very early on that life is very precarious and that you are lucky to be alive and you are lucky to be in a country where people don't hound you in concentration camps, and allow you to be, and allow you to develop, to have an education.

"I knew about sadness, what it is like if your mother died and what it was like to have children, and marriage break-up, struggles with trying to find work."

Koval's continued interest in science means that she is "pinged" several times a day with internet alerts to news of breakthroughs, discoveries, inventions, artificial intelligence ... the list goes on. It brought on the mild anxiety that as soon as the book was published it would be out of date.

"Every day I read this stuff," she says. "Is this

going to change what I've already written? Do I need to update this? Although it was worrisome — I didn't want to be out of date with anything — it was extraordinary.

"I just kept seeing extraordinary things that human beings were. And I just thought, well, to do this, this little bog-standard mammal, stands on the shoulders of giants."

KOVAL points to the recent news that the hole in the ozone layer has nearly closed, thanks not only to our understanding of what the ozone layer is, but our ability to work out what was causing it and then band together to have CFCs banned.

"This is extraordinary, an extraordinary amount of co-operation.

"And, of course, this pandemic ... I didn't finish writing it until July and I just thought I needed a postscript.

"It is an experiment we all didn't need to have but it is certainly focusing the mind about what can be done when people begin to work on a problem we didn't understand before."

A LETTER TO LAYLA BY RAMONA KOVAL (TEXT PUBLISHING, \$34.99) IS OUT NOW

A Letter to Layla author Ramona Koval; and below, with her youngest granddaughter Layla after which the book is named.

