Instead of a wedding ring, he has a tattoo on the inside of his ring finger. His hands are as big as hams.

"I was crazy," he recounts. "I remember the couple of times we ate out as a family during that time, just bursting into tears that I couldn't find something on the menu that I thought was low in fat or healthy enough." Did he realise that it was not normal for a teenage boy to be so worried about ingesting fat? "Yeah ... but I just rationalised it as, 'I don't want to be normal.'"

Normal, Pocock is not: the 24-year-old is an abnormally gifted athlete, one of rugby union's best defensive openside flankers, whose brilliant anticipation allows him to perfectly time his movements at the breakdown to snatch the ball. He was the Wallabies' 79th Test captain at age 23.

He also had a vastly different upbringing to his contemporaries, growing up on a farm in troubled Zimbabwe before the land redistribution policies of ZANU-PF, Zimbabwe's ruling party since the country's independence in 1980, forced his parents to seek refuge for their young family in Australia in 2002.

He is a committed Christian, but dislikes organised religion. He is a vocal supporter of gay marriage, and he and his partner, Emma, whom he refers to as his wife, have agreed not to legally formalise their vows until same-sex marriage is introduced. (In 2010 they held a private Christian ceremony to formalise their commitment. They consider themselves married.)

When injured, Pocock reads books - a mix of literary fiction, memoir and social theory. His heroes are Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and radical Christian feminist Dorothy Day.

Instead of seeking lucrative sponsorship deals to supplement his income, Pocock is embarrassed by them. He tapes over the logos on his boots because he feels uncomfortable promoting brands that exploit child labour to produce their sportswear. Together with his friend Luke O'Keefe, Pocock has established Eightytwenty Vision, a community-development charity in Zimbabwe, and they are developing a prototype for an ethically made rugby boot to fund it.

While many sportsmen his age use their Twitter accounts to lambast enemies or to post pictures of themselves flexing biceps and making gangster signs, Pocock tweets pictures of his oil paintings and home-grown vegetables. He also enjoys the odd "crafternoon" spent screen printing T-shirts (although he draws the line at scrap-booking).

Having now signed with the ACT Brumbies after seven years with Perth's Western Force, Pocock and Emma recently moved to Canberra. He suggests I meet them at one of the few places in the city, a cafe in Manuka, that serves free-trade coffee. It's spring and, posted to his Instagram account, are snaps from a weekend the couple spent at the Floriade flower festival.

Every time he shifts position or leans forward to rest his elbows, the table rattles. Economy-class seats are a problem, particularly when wedged between fellow rugby players. He complains in his memoir, Openside, that when browsing op shops, it is impossible to find vintage shorts that fit him.

Pocock drinks soy-milk coffee and orders the "Hulk" breakfast, without beans. He speaks quietly and with a shyness that can almost seem diffident, but he smiles often and it floods his face when he does. He has slight cauliflower ears and a scar on his right eyebrow, but is otherwise unmarked from years of professional rugby, despite being laid up with a knee injury when I meet him.

Instead of a wedding ring, he has a tattoo on the inside of his ring finger. His hands are as big as hams.
Emma, also 24, a master's student, is exquisitely pretty and make-up free. She is possibly the only footy "WAG" to chat freely about what she calls the patriarchal structures of the rugby world and to drop the term "heteronormative" into conversation. She's not a natural rugby fan and often gently mocks the sport. The first time she saw him play, she devised a system to make the game more entertaining, which included the incorporation of dance moves into the line-out. "There is obviously a lot of stuff in the press about ... a kind of patriarchy, a misogyny that exists within our male sporting codes," Emma says. "Nothing I'd seen had really challenged those stereotypes until I met Dave."

Pocock's mother, Jane, describes Emma as "a gift". "He can be quite serious," she says. "He can take life quite seriously and by nature he is reserved. Em just makes him laugh and she lets him have fun." The pair met when they were both 20, not long after Pocock had moved to Perth from Brisbane to play for the Western Force.

He was signed to the team as a 17-year-old "apprentice", but he was so good that the coach at the time, John Mitchell, fielded him for some matches, even though it was against Australian Rugby Union rules at the time for under-18s to play. "At the first training, he blew everyone's imagination," Mitchell recalls. "He's always had that frame you see now. He is probably one of the most professional athletes I've come across. I think it's a lot from his self-discipline and his faith."

But it was a faith Pocock was questioning at the time. He had been raised in a Christian household, but when he left home in Brisbane at 17 and crossed the Nullarbor for his first professional rugby gig, the resulting independence set him on a path of self-discovery. "I had to figure out what I actually wanted out of life," he says. "When I arrived in Perth, I questioned everything and had a really good think about everything.'

The party scene wasn't doing much for him, so Pocock began to read. He read the writings of Dorothy Day, texts about radical Christianity such as Lee Camp's *Mere Discipleship*, and *The Politics of Jesus* by John Howard Yoder. He began to attend a Tuesday-night conversation group with like-minded friends, and he questioned the nature of church-based religion.

"The church has done a great disservice to Jesus, the human," Pocock says. "My approach to the Bible has changed so much ... it's a very old book written by people with an agenda being passed down. It was based on the old Jewish way of thinking, which was very patriarchal. And as for the New Testament, how much of it is what people wanted Jesus to be like and how much of it is what he was actually like? I think that's an area that gets abused a lot." In 2008 he met Emma at a prayer vigil for the homeless outside Parliament House in Perth, but they spent a year book-swapping, emailing and going on "friend dates" before they became a couple. Pocock, taciturn, methodical and also fairly shy, was not about to rush into anything. His close friend Luke O'Keefe, who is married, remembers Pocock asking him "broad questions" about love and commitment before he proposed to Emma. "One time we were fishing in Albany, and he asked me when did I know I loved my wife," O'Keefe says. "That's what Dave does; he makes decisions after he's pursued knowledge. They're measured decisions."

Perhaps the only decision Pocock never made consciously was the one to become a professional rugby union player. It was something he wanted for as long as he could remember. His father and both his grandfathers were rugby union men, and Pocock started playing when he was in year 3 at the Midlands Christian College in Gweru, Zimbabwe. Pocock would sleep with his football instead of a teddy, and when his father came home from a long day's farm work, Pocock and his two younger brothers, Mike, now 23, and Steve, 20, would beg him to practise with them. "Just 100 kicks!" they would cry.

Pocock's father, Andy, who ran cattle and grew vegetables and export flowers on their 2800-hectare farm, was also a teacher at the local school. "I clearly remember him passionately explaining ... [to] the foreman and other workers back on the farm in Zimbabwe about doing half jobs," Pocock recounts. "Half jobs were unacceptable."

In 2000, the Zimbabwean government began its land-redistribution program, farmers in the area began receiving notices to vacate their properties. The Pococks were told initially that their farm was safe. Soon, though, there were riots in Gweru over food shortages, and Pocock remembers entering his parents' bedroom one night and seeing a map of Australia spread across their bed. The Pococks applied for visas to emigrate to Australia, but the process was slow.

While they were waiting, the political situation worsened. They were given a "Section 8" notice, which meant they had 90 days to vacate their farm. Inventories of all farm equipment, vehicles and farming implements were taken, including greenhouse lights for the export flowers worth about $200,000. All of it was to be given over to the "landless people of Zimbabwe". (In fact, the whole lot ended up in the possession of the local provincial governor. When David returned to the property in 2009 with his friend O'Keefe, it was disused and rundown.)

Increasingly, workers on the Pocock farm were harassed and beaten if they didn't attend rallies supporting ZANU-PF. A neighbouring white farmer was strangled with barbed wire and his farmhouse burned. A close farmer friend of the family and his son were ambushed by armed men. The father was killed, but the son survived, despite taking nine bullets. By this time, David was 12. "That was probably the most rattling experience as a kid," he recalls.

David's youngest brother, Steve, began to suffer from serious anxiety problems and the family moved from their farm into Gweru, but soon that became unsafe, too. They left for South Africa, where they lived for eight months in Pocock's grandfather's holiday home at Port Alfred, in Eastern Cape province. Finally, the Australian residency visa came through in 2002 and the family moved to Brisbane. All three boys enrolled in Anglican Church Grammar School, "Churchie", but the adjustment wasn't easy. It was about this
In dealing with his eating anxieties, it is discretion such as this, combined with his leadership skills and athleticism, that marked him as captain material early on in his career. "Those things need to be brought up with coaches and senior players before they are made public," he says.

David Pocock became interested in the views of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, in particular his ideas about "inner community" and the "shadow self", and integrating the opposites within the self.

He thought a lot about his own "shadow self" - the negative aspects of his personality he carried around in his subconscious. "I was trying to come to terms with my motives for being the best," he explains. "Is it just because I want people's approval or want people to like me, and I want to be famous, for want of a better word? Or was it because I enjoy challenging myself and it was something I loved doing? I realised those things are in everyone. It's a little bit of both."

I am given a tour of the Brumbies' new in-house eating facility. They are the first Australian rugby team to have their own chef on the premises. "It's a matter of getting a lot of food into them," is how chef Brian Gibson describes his job. Every table has a collection of vitamin supplements and protein powder at its centre, next to the salt and pepper grinders. As well, there is a huge tub of something called "Re-Activate Hardcore", a caffeine-based performance supplement, which, if you take too much of it, makes your skin feel like spiders are crawling on it, or so I'm told. Eventually, the non-injured players are corralled by the forwards coach Laurie Fisher, a Willie Nelson doppelgänger in a Brumbies cap, and known as a scrum sensei. Fisher is a master of the breakdown and Pocock is a master at stealing balls from the breakdown. "He is one of the world's best in his position," Fisher tells me.

Pocock was attracted to the culture of the ACT Brumbies and the prospect of improving his attack and linking games, all things Fisher wants to work on with him. He is vague about his reasons for leaving the Western Force, but part of the appeal of the Brumbies must be that it is a better-performing team. Despite being such a gifted player, Pocock has never been on a team that has won a professional tournament. According to his mother, Jane, even as a schoolboy player David was difficult to endure in the car on the way home after a loss. "He hates losing," she says.

In late 2008, after he had been playing for the Western Force for two years, Pocock made his Wallabies debut in Hong Kong against the All Blacks, then went on the Wallabies European tour that same year. But it was 2009 when he consolidated his place in the starting lineup of the national team, winning the John Eales Medal -Australian rugby's highest honour. Then, in 2011, he competed in his first Rugby World Cup, playing the game of his life in the quarter-final against South Africa, won 11-9 by Australia.

Pocock describes in his memoir how nervous he was before the match. "In the afternoon I sat on my bed and thought how I got here - my love of the game, which had started in Zimbabwe, and then training so hard to realise my goals," he recalls. "Getting up at 5.30am to go to the gym or do fitness or hill runs in our cul-de-sac before school; getting up early on holidays to get my training done ... I had made it to this point, but there was no more to do. The game was there to be won."

That game was indeed won, in no small part because of the amazing pilfering skills of the man in the No. 7 jersey. But the tournament was then lost - Australia crashed in the semi-final to the All Blacks by 20-6 - and Wallabies fans and rugby's governing body were left to ponder what went wrong.

"The Australian Rugby Union are obviously working through some things with Quade," Pocock says, "but from my point of view those things need to be brought up with coaches and senior players before they are made public."

It is discretion such as this, combined with his leadership skills and athleticism, that marked him as captain material early on in his playing career.

In dealing with his eating anxieties, Pocock became interested in the views of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, in particular his ideas about "inner community" and the "shadow self", and integrating the opposites within the self.

"I was intrigued by Jung," Pocock says. "It made so much sense ... reading about the shadow self and the ego and the way they interact."

He thought a lot about his own "shadow self" - the negative aspects of his personality he carried around in his subconscious. "I was trying to come to terms with my motives for being the best," he explains. "Is it just because I want people's approval or want people to like me, and I want to be famous, for want of a better word? Or was it because I enjoy challenging myself and it was something I love doing? I realised those things are in everyone. It's a little bit of both."

I came up with some other interesting pieces on the Pococks. I am sure they must have been well-known to the farming community around Gweru from the info in this one, http://www.voxy.co.nz/sport/no-more-guns-under-bed-wallabies-prodigy/5/18142 And... http://davidpocock.com/about-dave.html