

GOOD, BAD & GERMAINE

Trailblazing feminist Germaine Greer is unstoppable and impossible to ignore.

David Leser talks to one of our favourite and most controversial Australians about the myths and realities of her life.

THE WHITE DOVES ARE fluttering above the stone cottage as Germaine Greer picks sweet peas in her English garden – a posy of soft, fragrant colours arranging themselves in her weathered hands. It is a good omen, gentle and benign. Whether or not it is a cunning deception on the part of Nature and Woman only time will tell.

As we know from years of reading, watching and listening to the keeper of these feathery peace symbols, Germaine Greer has a manner and mouth on her capable of melting iron. For more than 40 years, she has been basking in controversy, lacerating her opponents, living a life of such bold, provocative strokes that only the knave or fool would underestimate her.

No amount of research can ever really equip you for an intellectual joust with the most prolific and outspoken feminist of her generation. She knows too much,

thinks too well and, for over four decades, has been speaking and writing on too many themes – sex, politics, menopause, women painters, teenage boys, Aboriginal Australia, Shakespeare’s wife – even the merits of football and Posh Spice – to imagine that one could ever properly do her justice.

Her first book, of course, *The Female Eunuch*, remains, 38 years after its first publication, possibly the most influential feminist tract of its generation, sold to over four million people, translated into a dozen or more languages, reprinted hundreds of times, pirated and bootlegged to such an extent that, today, in Third World cities, such as Calcutta, you can find copies on cheap paper, bleeding with run-away ink.

So, yes, there’s the industrial-sized brain that cautions the visitor to her County Essex lair, but there’s also the viper’s tongue which accompanies it.

“Anything sharp to declare?” the airport officials ask when she leaves the country. “Only my tongue,” she replies loudly, thinking they might get the joke. They don’t, not usually, but then again neither do others who’ve felt the prick and sting over the years.

She described her unauthorised biographer, Christine Wallace, as an “amoeba”, a “dung

beetle”, “intestinal flora” and a “brain-dead hack”, for having the temerity to want to write about her life some years ago. “Go near my mother,” she told the respected Australian journalist, “and I’ll kneecap you”, although today she denies uttering those words.

“Now hang on a minute,” she says, “hang on a minute ... I didn’t say anything about knee-capping Christine Wallace. And I don’t know if I called her a dung beetle. I called her a flesh-eating bacterium because that’s what she was doing [writing a biography of me] ... she was rolling around in her own excrement.”

This qualification must come as a blessed relief to Christine Wallace. So, too, Cherie Blair, who was described as “a concubine”, author Salmon Rushdie as “a megalomaniac”, Victoria Beckham as “a scrawny, sabretoothed beast” and British feminist columnist, Suzanne Moore, as a woman with “bird’s-nested hair ... f--k-me shoes, three fat inches of cleavage” and a “lipstick-rotted brain”.

Suzanne Moore’s crime was to repeat false claims that Germaine had had a hysterectomy as a young woman, a claim first made by Richard Neville, in his book *Hippie Hippie Shake*. (The book, about >>>



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK HARRISON.

Germaine Greer, 69, in the garden of her UK home. Her love of nature and advocacy for the environment are just some of many interests and passions.

the 1960s counter-culture revolution, is currently being made into a film – much to Germaine’s displeasure.)

“Imagine my amazement when I learn that he’s informed the world that I had a hysterectomy,” she says now. “I would have said [if he’d asked me] ‘Who did it? A vet?’ ”

In fact, Richard Neville *had* asked her by dint of having sent her the manuscript prior to publication. He was requesting corrections to any errors of fact. None came. Instead, after publication, Germaine insisted a correction slip about the fallacious hysterectomy be placed in every book in every bookstore in the world.

It was the beginning of the end of a friendship that had flowered during the heady days of the London underground magazine, *Oz*, when Germaine had posed nude for the cover and taken to writing – under the name Dr G – lewd and explicit tales about the virtues of free love and group sex.

She was impossible not to notice, as American writer Tom Wolfe discovered when he met her. “A thin, hard-looking woman,” he noted, “with a tremendous curly electric hairdo and the most outrageous mouth I had ever heard on a woman.”

And that was just before she set fire to her hair at dinner. “She was bored,” wrote Christine Wallace, in the biography, *Untamed Shrew*, that so raised Germaine’s hackles. “Two waiters ran over and flapped furiously at the flames with napkins, while Greer sat with a sublime smile on her face.”

TODAY, GERMAINE GREER is slouched against her rustic kitchen island like a gun-slinger at rest, legs spread, one foot up on the bench and a look on her face that alternates between good-natured tolerance and shoot-’em-dead disdain.

If truth be known, I’ve been in training for this moment for 30 years – primed by the hundreds of interviews that have come before this, but more importantly, prepared by 20 years of marriage to a feminist.

How could a man, I’ve often asked myself, from the post-war baby boomer generation contemplate marriage and not consider some of the propositions first raised in *The Female Eunuch* – that “the real theatre of the sex war is the domestic hearth”, that marriage is slavery, that a full bosom is a “millstone” around a woman’s neck, that most men hate women at least some of the time and that a woman’s essential quality is one of “castratedness”.

One mightn’t agree with them all, but it would be foolhardy, blind or both not to recognise, even grudgingly, how the book was a challenge to men and women alike.



Above: Germaine’s fierce intelligence was not encouraged growing up in a “bookless” house in Melbourne. Yet, her book *The Female Eunuch* would become a feminist classic.

It is also a deep insight into Germaine Greer’s person. “I cannot claim,” she wrote in *The Female Eunuch*, “to be fully emancipated from the dream that some enormous man, say six foot six, heavily shouldered and so forth to match, will crush me to his tweeds, look down into my eyes and leave the taste of heaven or the scorch of his passion on my waiting lips. For three weeks, I was married to him.”

Ask her now what *was* she thinking all those years ago – in 1968 – when she said yes to marriage and she replies, “It was the wrong thing to have done. Unfair to him ... and unfair to me”.

Was it true that she was unfaithful to him seven times in the three weeks they were married? “Something like that. I kept going back to the old boyfriends and saying, ‘I got myself into terrible trouble’, and they would say, ‘There, there, never mind’, and one thing led to another and I’d think, [laughing] ‘Oh dear, shit, sorry about that’.

“The other thing is my husband [Australian journalist Paul du Feu] was probably in love with me, but it expressed itself in jealousy and hostility. I don’t think I’ve ever told the whole story, [but] I was not allowed to sleep in the bed with him on my wedding night. He made me sleep in the armchair. He was drunk and he was a nasty drunk.”

It beggars belief that anyone, even a “six foot six heavily shouldered man”, could keep Germaine Greer from her own bed and it prompts the question as to whether this rejection might have stemmed from the fact that she’d agreed to dance with a “transvestite lesbian” on her wedding night?

“No, no, it was much more than that,” she replies. “Before I married him, I said, ‘It can’t be an ordinary marriage. I still have to go on doing what I do’. ‘Oh, that’s fine’, [he said]. ‘I still have to go on teaching at the university.’ ‘That’s cool’, [he said]. And it wasn’t cool at all.”

The great moment of parting came three weeks after the wedding, when du Feu took Germaine to a drinks party on Sunday morning. As she recalls now to *The Weekly*: “He looked around the room and he said, ‘You know, I could have any woman in this room’. And there was only one answer: *‘Except me.’* And I walked out the door and ran, and kept on running. It was as if somebody had taken a rock off my head. It was unbelievable.”

And you’ve been free ever since? “Never likely to repeat that. I don’t know what I thought I was doing.”

Notorious for her sexual aggression, Germaine denies promiscuity. “I don’t really have men in every port,” she says. “Never did. The funny thing about all the people who go on about me and my legendary promiscuity is that they can never name a partner. I say, ‘Come on, show me the list.’ ”

Can you imagine wanting to grow older now with someone, having that companionship? “Oh, well, it’s strange ... I’ve been asked to marry someone more often in the last 10 years than ever before in my life,” she says. The same person? “Hmmm ... hmmm ... pretty much.”

Are you considering it? “Absolutely not.” Would you consider living with him? “Probably not. He only asks because he knows I’ll say no.”

>>>



Above: Described as a “proselytiser of sexual liberation”, Germaine, the high priestess of ‘60s feminism, strikes a pose to parody the portrayal of women as sex objects, circa 1971.

I sense that part of you is tempted to say yes? “No, no, no, no, no ... I’d be more likely to marry my dog.”

GERMAINE GREER is 70 years old next birthday. During the course of her remarkable life, she has lived in Australia, England, Italy and travelled the world extensively. She has purchased rainforest, championed Aboriginal rights and weighed into the public debate on just about every subject under the sun. She has been assaulted, arrested, raped, ridiculed, lionised, taken hostage in her own house (by a female student who grabbed her by the throat, held her down for three hours and kept calling her “Mummy”) and turned into a subject for biography, documentary, play, film and song. (She plans to have Frank Zappa’s *G-spot Tornado* played at her funeral!)

There is no one like her. When the second wave of feminism erupted in the ‘60s, Germaine was its high priestess. Tall, beautiful and precociously bright, she’d been living “under a load of adolescent despair” for as long as she could remember, born to parents whom she felt didn’t love her, marooned in a “bookless” house in suburban Melbourne, attending a private convent school, where the girls were taught the evils of sex. She took to learning *Hamlet* by heart and reading sonnets in graveyards. “I was a freak waiting to be born,” she would say.

She won a teacher’s scholarship, enrolled at the University of Melbourne, where she graduated with a degree in English and French, then moved to Sydney, where she joined the group of intellectual and artistic larrikins known as the Sydney Push.

With a Masters degree in Romantic Poetry, she then won a Commonwealth Scholarship to Cambridge University, where she earned a PhD for her investigation into the “ethic of love and marriage in Shakespeare’s early comedies”. That was in 1968 – the same year as her marriage.

Since then, she’s been an anarchist, professor, author, columnist, broadcaster, editor, art historian, comedy show presenter (in the UK) and special guest on the British version of *Celebrity Big Brother* (she lasted five days).

For decades now, her views have been raked over by other writers looking for the fatal flaws – the U-turns and massive contradictions – in her arguments, especially as they related to sex and family.

Biographer Christine Wallace described how this proselytiser for sexual liberation sought to have a child in her late 30s, going so far as to have her uterus reconstructed by a Harley Street specialist. Ask Germaine about this now and she looks at you with one of those baleful glares, and says, “I gave it my best shot. It didn’t work. End of story. I don’t know why Australians pretend [having a child] is a one-way ticket to fulfilment, because it isn’t. I’ve watched my friends have children and I’ve never seen them suffer more than through their children. Either their children were ill or in trouble. Nightmare. Just endless agony.

“And then [you] become grandparents, but for lots of people that involves exclusion from the family ... the older generation gets held at arm’s length. I’ve had the company of 19 to 23-year-olds [students] all my life. I’ve been surrounded by young

“THAT’S PROBABLY WHY I WROTE *THE FEMALE EUNUCH* – BECAUSE THERE WAS MY MOTHER, A VERY INTELLIGENT, BEAUTIFUL, HEALTHY WOMAN WHO DIDN’T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH HERSELF.”

people. It’s not as if I’m marooned in some geriatric enclave.”

Perhaps not, but there is the keen sense with Germaine Greer that there’s much more isolation in her life than she’d ever care to admit, despite some long-standing friendships and the fact that she is known for her great kindness and generosity.

During the course of our three-and-a-half hours together, she referred a number of times – unsolicited – to the difficulties of her relationship with her brother and sister.

“These are not easy relationships,” she said, “for a sister [Germaine] who abandoned them when they were little to the care of a mad mother and an indifferent father. I f---d off with never a backward look because if I’d stayed I might have killed my mother.

“She was driving me crazy and she was doing it on purpose. She was the wind-up merchant like many a mother I can think of – especially of that generation. They were a mischievous bunch of angry women and that’s probably why I wrote *The Female Eunuch* – because there was my mother, a very intelligent, beautiful, healthy woman who didn’t know what to do with herself.”

Germaine has been returning regularly to Australia for years now, in an effort to turn a dairy farm she bought into rainforest. I ask her whether she’s seen the bumper stickers at home which read: “Oh shit, I’ve turned into my mother”, given how notorious she is for her own rage? “But I haven’t got it [rage],” she says. “I’ve never had it. I’m not an aggressive person at all.”

Really? You’re known to be as cranky as a cobra? “It’s not true,” she insists. “It simply isn’t true ...”

What appears to be rage at worst, anger at best, is in Germaine’s estimation, merely indignation. “Oh, for Christ’s sake,” she says, when pressed on the subject. “I’m an Australian [and] you’ll know what I f-----g think ‘cause I’ll tell you, but I’m not going to fester and froth, and I’m certainly not going to slap you or knock you around.” >>>



Left: Germaine thinks that Australians have misconceptions about her, but she says they are “the best people in the world”.

The only time, she says, she’s ever felt rage was at her 50th birthday party, when the cousin of a friend baited and mocked her to such an extent that her throat constricted and she lost her powers of speech.

I suggest to her that this must have been a first. “And the last, too,” she fires back. “I’ve never let that happen again. It was counter-productive, hopeless. I couldn’t marshal my arguments.”

Rage and grief are different. “In Australia, I’ve got this kind of weird reputation as this mad virago. Australians have no idea what I’ve been doing for the past 40 years. English people know what I’ve been doing. They’re used to me and they know that I’m not a raging madwoman. I don’t know why Australians think that. I write something disparaging about Steve Irwin [“the only creatures he couldn’t dominate were parrots”] and they think, ‘Why did she have to attack him?’. I didn’t attack him. I simply pointed out that his kind of conservation was wrong.”

(It is important to note here that Germaine still believes Australians to be “the best people in the world”. It is just that they are doing some of the “worst things in the world”, like destroying our major river system.)

Margaret Fink claims her “cherished” friend of 40 years possesses “every human quality known to man and woman”. Endurance, courage, imagination, honesty, outspokenness ... She is also a polymath, mimic and genius to boot. Too true, but self-reflection is not among those qualities.

Suggest to Germaine that she is – in the words of one critic – as “introspective as a sweet potato” and she replies, “I’m *not* introspective. And less so as I get older. I don’t fascinate myself at all.”

This is a curious remark given the self-absorption often required to wade into the public debate – especially with the kind of ferocity Germaine regularly shows. It is also curious given that, during the course of our morning/afternoon communion, she does not ask her guest a single question, nor does she offer him a cup of tea, let alone a glass of water, and this despite him having crossed the English Channel and taken a train from London to see her.

Indeed, when presented at the end of this meeting with a small gift of two jars of French jam, she looks at them sniffily

“THE IDEA THAT IN 40 YEARS WE COULD HAVE NO HONEY BEES IS HORRIFYING AND GRIEF-STRIKING. YOU JUST FEEL AS IF A CLAW WENT AROUND YOUR HEART ...”

and says, “Jam? I’ve got plum trees all over the place”.

She then reads the labels on the jam and exclaims, “Jam from France? You mean you didn’t even make it yourself?”

OF ALL THE MILLIONS of beautifully chosen words Germaine Greer has ever written in her life, the ones that have come closest to the raw truth of her character are possibly those in the book about her father, *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You*.

Published nearly 20 years ago, it remains to this day the most honest glimpse she has given into her heartache. “Daddy never once hugged me,” she wrote. “If I put my arms around him, he would grimace ... I clung to the faith that he did not really find me repulsive ... If he had let me under his guard, I should have crept into his heart and found the wound there.”

Later on, as her search for her father’s identity had gathered momentum, she would ask herself whether or not she was “congenitally unlovable”, whether or not her own “censorious, scrutinising nature” had turned her father from her. To her eternal relief, she found it had not. She found that her father had in fact adored her, it was just that the war and his generation of men had left him incapable of showing it.

“That’s why I started to write *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You*,” she tells me now, “because I was one of a generation of children whose fathers were literally speechless, who thought that if they allowed anyone in closer, all their horror and fear and self-doubt, that the war had engendered in them, would just overwhelm them. So they were a silent generation.”

Germaine Greer almost verges on the vulnerable when she talks like this. Her face softens and the gunslinger glower melts away. A similar tenderness takes over when she speaks about the rhapsody of nature – for the honey bees and swallows in her garden that are threatened, like so much else, with extinction.

“The idea that in 40 years we could have no honey bees is horrifying and grief-striking. You just feel as if a claw went around your heart when you think

something like that. When my swallows stopped coming, I really grieved. I felt a chill that this beautiful thing ... stopped happening. And then, after 10 years, they came back and I was ridiculously happy for weeks. No one could understand why I was so happy.”

It is a welcome thought, not just the swallows returning, but Germaine Greer finding happiness. For a lifetime, she has been – in her own words – “kicking arse, taking names, talking loud and drawing a crowd”.

She has been an intellectual giantess among the pygmies and just like Virginia Woolf once said of another great radical, feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, “She is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence, even now among the living.

We should all be grateful for that. ■