Dear Reader

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Revealing Ourselves

Toby Young—Reflects on The Modern Day Mob

Heather Morris—The Tattooist of Auschwitz

Wednesday Martin on Women's Sexuality
“I like living. I have sometimes been wildly, despairingly, acutely miserable, racked with sorrow; but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to be alive is a grand thing.”

Agatha Christie
Contributors

Heather Morris
Heather Morris is a New Zealand writer who now lives in Australia. She has written several screenplays. The Tattooist of Auschwitz is her debut novel.

Toby Young
Toby Young was a ‘bright young thing’ in the Cool Britannia revolution of the 90s. He wrote a successful book detailing his time at Vanity Fair which was then adapted into a move featuring Simon Pegg. He has, at various times, been a journalist, a columnist for the Spectator, a judge on Top Chef, co-founder of The Modern Review, a television producer, Director of the West London Free School. He has recently taken up a post at Quillette as Associate Editor.

Wednesday Martin
Dr. Wednesday Martin is a writer and social researcher whose memoir Primates of Park Avenue was an instant #1 New York Times bestseller. Wednesday has written for The New York Times, Harper’s Bazaar, The Atlantic and The Daily Beast among others. Her latest book Untrue focuses on women’s sexuality and debunking many of the myths surrounding this topic.

Claire Bidwell
Claire Bidwell Smith is no stranger to grief. Her debut book, The Rules of Inheritance was the has been published in 17 countries and was nominated for a Books For A Better Life Award. Her latest book, Anxiety: The Missing Stage of Grief explores the connection between anxiety and grief and bridges the two emotions in practical and profound ways.

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Keith Nunes is a New Zealand writer whose poetry, haiku and short fiction has appeared in many publications including Landfall, Takahe and North & South. He won the 2017 Flash Frontier Short Fiction Writing Award and has been published in the USA and Canada including the Atlanta Review, in the UK and Australia.

Duke Haney

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New Zealander Heather Morris always has loved a good screenplay. She's written quite a few of them, but when she was introduced to holocaust survivor Lale Sokolov, she never dreamed that his story would be the basis of her debut novel. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is a heartbreaking tale of finding love in a hellish landscape and since publication it has captured the public's imagination. The story is now set to be turned into an international drama series after British Producer Synchronicity Films secured the rights.

Heather Morris spoke to Zara Potts in Auckland about how she came to be introduced to the man whose incredible story has changed her own life.

*The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is a remarkable book and I'd like to talk to you about the story of it, but I don't want to say too much and spoil the plot…

I don't mind giving away the ending because we know up front that it has a happy ending and that may help people persevere.

That's very helpful… Okay, let's start at the beginning of the story and how you met this man, Lale Sokolov.

It was one of those strange things. I was having a cup of coffee with a friend and she just came out and said to me, "I have a friend Gary, whose mother has just died, and his dad has asked him to find someone to tell a story to."

That was all you knew… just 'a' story.

...a story. The other thing was that the person he told his story to, couldn't be Jewish. My friend knew I wasn't Jewish of course, and she asked me if I wanted to meet him. She knew I had been dabbling in writing screenplays and that I preferred stories that were based on real events or people, so naturally I said yes and the next weekend I knocked on his apartment door.

And that was all you knew. You didn't have any idea what kind of story?

I knew he was a Jewish man who had survived the holocaust.

That was it. So, you went to meet him and in that first meeting he talked a little bit about his experience at Auschwitz-Birkenau. You've said he was quite clinical and matter of fact about his story at first?

Absolutely. He was grieving terribly at that time and he stayed that way for many months. When he spoke, he would just throw out these bullet point statements at me that had no seeming connection to each other or coherency to the other but there were enough of these little vignettes coming through to make me think there was more to the story than first met the eye.

So, for two hours he talked, and I listened, and I just said to him at the end of that first meeting, "Can I come back?" and he said "Yes but come back quickly. Hurry up and write my story, I need to be with Gita."

Gita was his wife, who played a critical part in the story. But these first few meetings were almost as if he was interviewing you for the job, and he finally entrusted you with his story because of his dogs, is that right?

Ultimately it was. He had a dog called Tootsie, who was the size of a small pony and this was about three months into our talks—I'd been going three or four times a week, I was working full time and I was going after work before going home—and every time we sat down to talk one of the dogs would bring a tennis ball over and he'd throw it and they'd scampers after it. Then one day we were sitting there, and the dog came over with the ball and Lale reached to take it out of her mouth and she growled at him and wouldn't release it. She turned around and put her head on my knee and I just casually reached down and put my hand in her mouth and she released the ball and I threw it over my shoulder and sent a lamp flying and that was when Lale said, "Ah, my doggies like you. I like you. You can tell my story."

When you first began hearing his story, what was going through your mind? You were hearing bits and pieces and having to link it all up in your mind but was there a single point at which you thought 'Oh my god, this is an amazing story.' A point at which you realized that this wasn't just another holocaust story?

Yes, but not for some time. Part of my issue was not being Jewish, so at that time I couldn't really comprehend the importance of it to the Jewish community. I say this with no disrespect intended but having had a country education in rural New Zealand, I didn't have a vast knowledge of what happened during World War Two. I had really focused on the areas where the New Zealand army was involved. Of course, I knew some of it, I knew the holocaust had happened, I had read Anne Frank's diary when I was younger, but I hadn't really followed it up more than that. So, part of my challenge was to listen to Lale and then frantically go away and read everything I could, and what I was reading I was finding there was nothing there that really related to individual stories. It was very much about the numbers. Six million died in the holocaust, more than a million died in Auschwitz-Birkenau…

And that's hard to get your head around isn't it? Those enormous numbers are almost too big to comprehend. Sometimes it's very difficult to remember they relate to individual people. It’s very hard to connect with six million people. I hoped that people would connect with one.
It is amazing to read one person’s story—or in this book, two peoples’ stories. But in saying that, it’s hard to place these two lovers in this grotesque environment. But that grotesqueness is intrinsic to the story because Lale becomes the tattooist of Auschwitz. And even this job helps us connect to the real people because while we all know the prisoners had numbers tattooed on their arms, we don’t usually think about the fact that someone—another prisoner—had to actually tattoo these numbers into their fellow prisoners’ skin.

Yes, and I have met so many people since who have said to me, “I didn’t realise that they only numbered those in Auschwitz-Birkenau,” they thought all the concentration camps, Dachau, Mauthausen, were doing this too. They weren’t. It was only Auschwitz.

But the idea of this Jewish man having to tattoo other Jews is…

Defiling, he called it. He hated that. He had to tattoo the young girls and he said he hated it. “I was defiling their beautiful bodies,” he would say. And this is a man who was a lover in his previous life.

And it’s brutal as well. You’re actually physically violating someone’s flesh and to make a Jewish man do that to young Jewish girls—it’s incomprehensible really.

It is. And whether it was a rationalisation not to carry any guilt about what he was doing—of course he had survivor guilt—but he said it enabled him to help many people, he was a privileged prisoner.

His job as a tattooist was crucial to this story. It’s how he met Gita.

Yes, and because he was a privileged prisoner it meant he had freedom of movement and with that freedom of movement it gave him access throughout the camp—particularly at Birkenau, not so much Auschwitz—it allowed him to connect with the girls who worked in the area where the clothing was coming in and where the jewels could be smuggled sometimes to the local villagers…

You mean the villagers who lived around the camps?

That was one of the most startling things I learned, that the villagers came in and worked in the camps. Monday to Friday. 9 to 5. Clock in, clock out, go home to Mum and the wife and kids.

It was normal.

Normal, what they were creating. I won’t judge them but…

It is interesting, isn’t it, what people can become accustomed to? And you touched on this before, this survivor guilt, the guilt comes after the event, but at the point that it’s happening, you just have to survive, and I suppose our minds just shut out anything that makes it harder to survive. The will to live is an incredible thing.

A lot of people didn’t have it. A lot of people chose not to. Lale spoke about that. Some of the prisoners who came in and who just could not go on - sometimes it was after a week, but they just could not survive another day and they would choose their own method of leaving this world. There were options available, but Lale never had that desire.

Lale had a very strong will to survive. This helped him accept the job of camp tattooist, not an easy job having to tattoo the arms of thousands of young girls. But this is of course how he met Gita. Did he say whether he’d had a romantic response to any other girl while he was doing this, or was it just Gita? Was he just struck by a thunderbolt, so to speak?

Yes! The Italians have got a word for it...

Colpo di Fulmine. The thunderbolt of love.

Yes, exactly that. Now you must remember that Lale was a young man, he was just twenty-five. Gita was only eighteen. In his life before the camps, he had been a real playboy. I have photos of him as a young man in a suit, immaculately coiffured and to him it was very much a case of love ‘em and leave ‘em and have a great life and that’s how he had lived. For him to then find himself in Auschwitz holding the arm of a young girl who was dressed in rags with a shaven head and to be hit with this thunderbolt…. He told me sixty years later, ‘I knew in that second, I could never love another.’

Extraordinary. The thing about Auschwitz is that we just associate it with death. We don’t associate it with romance. It is an incredible juxtaposition really. How did they go about this romance? How does one go about courting someone in a death camp?

Yes. Interestingly enough I’ve actually met other survivors and children of survivors who have told me that their parents met in Auschwitz so Lale and Gita weren’t alone. It all depended on where you were in the hierarchy of things. Gita, by default of her connection with not just Lale but to another character in my book, Cila was able to do this.

In terms of how they got to know each other, they used the other prisoners as cover. They would mingle in amongst the thousands of prisoners when they had rest time. The other girls would provide cover and encircle them, and it enabled them to get to know each other. But as my book says, Gita didn’t actually want Lale to know very much about her at all…

No, and that’s the interesting thing, he didn’t actually know very much about her at all when they were in the camp.

No.

So, when liberation came, what does he do? How do you go about finding someone that you have such scant information about—Not only that, but he saw her go on a death march…

Yes, he did.

But he didn’t think she’d died. He knew she hadn’t died.

How?

Because that’s the kind of man he was. Everything for him was felt and he just knew she wasn’t dead.

Eventually he goes to find her. Tell me more about how he did this.

I thought it was lovely that he went looking for her and it was actually she who found him. He made it to Bratislava in Slovakia where she was from and he paced up and down that platform where the trains came in saying “Anyone from Birkenau? Does anybody know Gita?”
And this in the midst the chaos of post-war Europe.

When he first left Auschwitz he first went back to his home town. He had to know what had happened to his family. He knew somehow that Gita was alive, but he didn't have that same feeling about his family. He travelled to his hometown and he got there and stood outside what had been his home and a neighbour tried to shoo him away before he realised who he was. So, he finds that his sister has survived, and after a few days with her, he said he just never stopped talking about Gita and his sister told him to go and find her.

And that was that.

He went to Bratislava and tried to find her by checking the lists of all the returning prisoners, but he was getting nowhere. Somebody told him to go to the Red Cross, and he was on his way there. He had bought a cart and a horse with just enough room for him to stand on the back of and he was driving down the road and Gita and two of her friends were walking towards him and one of Gita's friends turned to her and said to her, “Look at that funny little man in that funny little cart.” And she looked up and she recognised him and stepped out into the road in front of the horse.

Incredible isn’t it? You just don’t hear stories like this every day.

It’s a Hollywood ending! I couldn’t make this up.

It’s a wonderful story with a happy ending, but when he was telling you all this—there must have been so much awfulness in his story too - was it kind of an unburdening for him? Was he worried that people would think he somehow collaborated because he had that privileged position—which is course, absurd given that he didn’t really have a choice?

I don’t know if he had internalised guilt, but when Gita was alive he would never do anything or say anything that could in anyway shame or harm her. But he told me very clearly when she was dead, that he never felt that he was a collaborator in any way.

Had anyone accused him of being a collaborator?
No. Never. But in the story, the young Cilka who was sixteen years old when she was made the concubine of the commandant of Birkenau, survived two years in that role only to have the finger pointed at her when she returned to Slovakia.

It beggar's belief, doesn't it?
She was charged with being a collaborator. She was sentenced to fifteen years hard labour for being a Nazi collaborator. In her charge sheet she was also accused of being a spy because she spoke three languages and that was enough to make her suspect.

Human nature is obscene. The things we do to each other.
Yes.

Now, you recently went to Poland and visited the site of the camps. What was your reaction to that?
It smacked me in the face. I was there with a group called the March for the Living—it’s an annual event where young Jewish students from around the world gather. They go there for education. I was there with an Australian and American group and there were some 14,000 of these young people there. The first day we went to Auschwitz on a bus with about 200 students. We went to Birkenau first and I walked through the gates and I just stood there and went ‘Holy…’ You can’t see where this place begins and ends and for about three hours we walked around, and I was just numb. A lot of the students were very emotional. I blindly walked around and then we went to Auschwitz. They’ve turned Auschwitz into a museum and a lot of the building holds the awful artefacts that show what that place was. At the very end of the day we went into the only crematoria that is in Auschwitz and I walked a few feet in and then turned around and walked out because I knew that was where Lale’s parents died.

Now, he didn’t know this did he? You found this out after he died?
Yes, he didn’t know that. We came out of there and it was a beautiful sunny day. After seven hours of this incredibly gut wrenching, emotional experience we sat down on the grass to unwind. I sat down with the students and the crematoria was six feet to my right and six feet to my left was the spot where they’d hung Rudolf Hoess. There were three rabbis from America and they started saying prayers and I just sat there thinking about what I’d seen, trying to process it all, and one Rabbi started talking and my ears pricked up. He said he was from Florida and just before he’d come on this trip, he went and visited two women from his community who had been in Auschwitz. They bore the tattooed numbers and he went on to say that for the first time, after knowing these ladies for years, he asked them about their tattoos. He had noticed that were would always stroke their arm when they were talking and so he had said to them “what do you remember about being tattooed? Did it hurt?” and my ears really pricked up at this. He said they both said they didn’t remember if it hurt but that they did remember the man who did it to them. They remembered him because he kept saying “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I don’t want to hurt you”

Lale Sokolov. And this Rabbi had no connection with you?
He didn’t know I was there.

He didn’t know your history or your book?
No. This corroborated everything I knew about Lale. I had spoken to another survivor who said that when she was tattooed she was taken up to the tattooist who told her “What I’m about to do to you just may save your life and I’m sorry.” So here I am hearing this Rabbi saying almost the same thing. 70 years after the event I’m sitting in the exact place hearing this story.

I guess the other thing about being at Auschwitz is being able to visualise the actual people who were there. I’m thinking of Josef Mengele on his platform picking out his victims… “You go left, you go right…”

The word evil comes to mind but… Evil doesn’t even do it justice.

Yes, evil is one of those words we throw around a lot but when you think about his crimes…. How he could call himself a doctor?
Well, I won’t use that title with him.

And Mengele was a person that Lale was terrified of, wasn’t he?
Yes. Evil is one of those words we throw around a lot but when you think about his crimes….
The only person.
He was the only person who sent chills down Lale’s spine.

Just the look of him.
Lale made no attempt to get around him or manipulate him in any way—anyone else he would—but he steered clear of Mengele.

You had a telling experience with Lale regarding Mengele when he took you to the Holocaust Museum in Melbourne, didn’t he? What happened there?
It was quite early on and he’d worked out that I wasn’t entirely comprehending the depth of what he’d lived through and he said to me ‘Come, I take you to the museum’.

For a history lesson.
Yes. We went there, and we were walking around, and he was showing me exhibits and pointing them out but once again, in quite a clinical way. “This is what’s happening here. This is Kristallnacht.”
At one point he got a little bit ahead of me and he was out of my sight around a corner and I suddenly heard this voice screaming “You bastard. You fucking bastard.” And I ran to him as did several other people in the room and he literally collapsed on the floor in front of us and we sat him up and his hand was shaking terribly and pointing up at this photograph of Josef Mengele.

Even all those years later, Mengele still had that effect.
Yes, just the sight of him could just drop him to his knees. We did go back to the museum a couple of times after that and each time I rang them and said I was coming back with Lale and asked if they could please take down Mengele’s photos.

Was there a deliberate decision on your part not to include a lot of the awful things that went on in Auschwitz?
I did. The only criticism I’ve had of the book, a gentleman who is an historian and academic in Holocaust studies made the comment that there wasn’t enough horror in it.

Not enough horror.
I said to him, I haven’t written the holocaust story I have just written a holocaust story.

And, it is something that you appreciate as a reader. Often when I approach books about the holocaust I have to brace myself for the horror and it’s actually very surprising to read a story about affirming love in such a time.
There is always hope.

And you’ve had a couple of holocaust deniers approach you?
Oh yes.

They’re always out there aren’t they?
I don’t engage.

One of the perils of social media.
Yes.

Deniers aside—does it worry you that stories of the holocaust and stories such as Lale’s are disappearing out of our collective consciousness? That the holocaust is fading out of collective memory.
Yes, it is.

Does that worry you?
Yes, it does. If you don’t learn from history you’re destined to repeat your mistakes. And Heaven forbid, there are signs of things not being well in many parts of the world right now. I can only hope that young people will read this—in fact, we’re looking at producing a young adult’s version of the book and I hope that it can be part of the school curriculum. Young people are like sponges and they ask the most amazing questions. I will continue to write the stories I know about. There are hundreds of thousands of testimonies of survivors and hopefully down the track people will look at these testimonies and tell the stories.

You’ve done a remarkable thing because you you’ve said that you were not a novelist, you were a screenwriter and so the whole process of writing this was quite a new thing for you.
A couple of people have said that there are a couple of places where the book still reads like a screenplay.

That just makes it easier to adapt to the screen when that happens!
When I went to the publishers with the story they said at first, they’d get a ghost writer but thankfully they decided to give me a shot. They said have a crack at it and I had the structure, I knew how I wanted it told, I knew about the importance of emotional arcs and so I took time off my full-time job and I went to Big Bear Mountain in California and stayed in my brother and sister in laws house and wrote the book there in a month. I knocked the bugger off.

In the immortal words of Sir Edmund Hilary…
And when I sent the finished manuscript to the publishers they came back and said, ‘you don’t know what you’re doing do you?’ And I said ‘No.’ I had gone from 1st person to 3rd person to 1st person again and so I was told that historical fiction must be written in the 3rd person.

Is that the rule?
I think it’s a convention. Luckily, they let me write it in first person.

It’s a great book—a fantastic achievement—and I can’t wait to see the movie.
First of all, I want to ask how you’re doing? In your piece you say you are still trying to come to terms with your public humiliation, did writing the piece help?

I’m fine. I’m happily married with four kids and my home has been a safe haven throughout this ordeal.

In your piece you say that in the eyes of your critics you are beyond redemption. Do you think that the critics are even concerned about the idea of redemption anymore—or is it just a case of wanting a scalp?

It’s hard to tell whether people participating in a witch-hunt are genuinely morally outraged or just intoxicated with blood lust—probably a combination of the two, like Spanish Inquisitors. When people are hunting you in a pack, they don’t think of you as another human being, just as prey. Characterising you as irredeemable is part of that dehumanisation process.

You have talked about your 30-year career and how you have written some ‘pretty sophomoric pieces’—but all journalists have written some fairly shameful pieces, or at the very least, pieces they’re not proud of, over their careers—is it fair for these to be used as evidence of ‘wrong thinking’ or poor character?

I don’t think it’s fair, but I don’t think I’m being judged on the basis of those pieces. In my article for Quillette I quoted Ben Shapiro, who made the point that the reason people become targeted by Left-wing outrage mobs isn’t because they’ve said terrible things. Rather, the hard Left decides up front that they hate you and then starts combing through everything you’ve written in order to find terrible things you’ve said to justify that hatred.

Why did they hate me to begin with? Because I’m a Tory, because I campaigned for Leave during the EU referendum, because I’ve been an advocate for an education policy that threatens their hegemony over public education and because I’m a white, heteronormative male.

What about context? It seems to have become problematic to say “Well, they were different times”—but realistically, they were. Things change, opinions change, but a lot of people don’t believe that context or intent matters. They are only concerned with the consequence—so if someone is offended by something you say or write—then that is the issue and whether you intentionally meant to cause offense or harm doesn’t matter. But surely it is more problematic to hold someone’s past up for inspection by today’s mores?

I think that’s true in my case and it also applies to anyone trying to “cleanse” our history of “problematic” writers and public figures. Recently, a group of students at Manchester University scrubbed out a mural in a student union building made up of ‘If’, the famous poem by Rudyard Kipling, and replaced it with ‘Still I Rise’ by Maya Angelou. Their rationale was that Kipling was a “racist”, an apologist for colonialism, and so on. But to condemn a writer for being insufficiently “woke”—for not conforming to today’s progressive orthodoxies—is to judge people in the past by the standards of a few activists in the present, to assume that today’s campus speech codes embody eternal verities, rather than fashionable dogma. Not only that, but it involves reducing Kipling to just one thing—the worst possible thing the activists can portray him as by their lights—when, in fact, like many great writers, he contained multitudes. After his son was killed in the First World War he became a critic of imperialism, not an apologist for it.

Anyone who knows a bit of history is well aware that periods in which the commentariat decide that they are, above all else, interested in promoting righteousness have never been fertile periods for art or literature or even good thinking. For instance, far better art emerged under Charles II than Oliver Cromwell. A Godly Commonwealth is rarely a fecund one. Do you agree with this?

I think there are lots of interesting parallels between puritanism in all its historical guises and the outrage mobs that spring up on social media and then spill over into the mainstream media. It’s always about punishing heretics.

I know people who hold what I deem to be pretty reasonable viewpoints, who are frightened to express them in case they’re held up as some kind of bigot or Nazi or idiot. Given your own experience, do you think they are right to feel that way?

Not necessarily. One of the interesting things about the current thought-police is that they’re not state actors. Rather, they’re individuals spontaneously combining to form censorious mobs that
end up intimidating powerful institutions to do their bidding, whether state bureaucracies or large corporations. It’s like a crowd-sourced Big Brother—a Big Brother created by the kind of liberals who a few years ago, would have complained about the state’s intrusion into private life. In theory, that means standing up to them should be easier since they don’t actually posses the power to arrest and imprison people whose views they disapprove of (although in the UK people have been prosecuted for telling inappropriate jokes). But challenging them requires all of us who value freedom of speech and viewpoint diversity to act in concert. Individuals, acting alone, cannot do it. There’s an instructive anecdote from Scott Alexander here, relayed on his blog slatestarcodes.com: “Here is a story I heard from a friend, which I will alter slightly to protect the innocent. A prestigious psychology professor signed an open letter in which psychologists condemned belief in innate sex differences. My friend knew that this professor believed such differences existed, and asked him why he signed the letter. He said that he expected everyone else in his department would sign it, so it would look really bad if he didn’t. My friend asked why he expected everyone else in his department to sign it, and he said ‘Probably for the same reason I did’.”

There does seem to be a mob mentality on the rise at the moment—particularly on social media platforms. And it doesn’t seem to matter which way your politics lean. I’ve seen academics like Mary Beard get absolutely hounded for things she’s written, which are just historical facts, but she is somehow held accountable for it. More recently I’ve seen Alison Moyet get hammered on Twitter over transgender issues where she has been called a transphobe and worse. What’s really concerning about this, is that the attacks seem to be focused on people who are naturally sympathetic to these causes and yet these people, who are probably natural allies of their accusers, are suffering the modern-day equivalent of ‘being run out of town’. Apart from your own experience, do you see instances of this happening?

Yes, you see it all the time. What’s that old saying? ‘The Right looks for allies, the Left looks for traitors. Not always true, but broadly true. I’ve had a few debates with fellow conservatives recently about whether we should embrace the shaming tactics of the Left in order to force them to act more reasonably. But I think it would be better to eschew those tactics and defend anyone accused of wrong think, whether on the left or the right. Let the regressive Left turn on the moderate Left and, hopefully, the moderate Left will distance itself from this ideological inquisition. If we attack the Left, by contrast, it will just create a mood of solidarity and prolong this awful trend.

One of the unnerving things that I see happening is the false equivalence around opinion versus expertise. It doesn’t seem to matter whether you actually have knowledge or facts about a subject, another person’s feeling about the subjects seems to hold just as much weight. I have a theory that this has emerged with the rise of the opinion column in place of news—do you have any theories on why this has happened?

It’s the legacy of post-modernism—a whole generation of university graduates in the humanities and social sciences has been taught there is no meaningful distinction between facts and values, between knowledge and belief. There is no such thing as objectivity or truth, just competing narratives. That was the message of an orientation pamphlet given to freshmen at Brown University in 2015 which demanded quantitative data, statistical information and written documentation as tools of “systematic oppression”.

This isn’t asserted as a truth in its own right—all ‘truth’ is suspect, after all—but as a kind of religious dogma. Michiko Kakutani, the New York Times critic, has just written a book linking post-modernism to the rise of Trump that looks interesting. He’s the first post-truth President.

I spoke to an Australian writer recently who compared the modern-day media to the new morality police who seem to be insistent on punishing wrongdoing or wrong thinkers. Is there something in that, do you think?

I don’t think media commentators are the prime actors. Rather, they’re doing the bidding of the secular religious police, who are, for the most part, hard Left university professors and public intellectuals.

I think the term that you use in your piece—offense archaeologists—is a very good one. Do you believe that the majority of these people who trawl through your old articles and Twitter feed are not really offended—but are just simply trying to find anything they can to cast you in a bad light?

No question. As I said in my Quillette piece, if they were genuinely upset by the various thought crimes I’ve been accused of, why would they spend hours sifting through all my work to find them? And if they think they’re genuinely offensive, why go to such lengths to broadcast them as widely as possible? Do they want to upset people? No, they’re shocked in the sense that Captain Renault was shocked when he discovered gambling going on at Rick’s Place in Casablanca.

Do you have a theory on why the commentariat seem to be completely unaware of historical parallels? Particularly the Soviet era style of blackening someone’s name and dragging out any utterance as a sign of guilt? Or are they aware and they just don’t care?

They’re blissfully unaware. They think anyone comparing the current climate of intolerance on university campuses to life behind the Iron Curtain is a hysteric. They think that all this talk of “Twitter mobs” and “thought police” and free speech being in peril is just right-wing rhetoric. A moral panic. Until they find themselves targeted by a Twitchfork mob, obviously. Then they change their minds.

I’m interested in your views on the polarisation of politics and how it has become so divided. I would consider myself to have pretty traditional left leaning views. I don’t support capital punishment, I support a welfare state, I am a supporter of equal rights for all, I believe in change their minds.

When did the lines for left and right move to such extreme positions do you think? I think the regressive Left has always existed and has always had contempt for social democrats, going back at least as far as the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. But it was in retreat until the twin victories of Trump and Brexit. I think Trump’s victory in particular radicalised social democrats, convinced them that the regressive Left may have been right about capitalism inexcusably leading to fascism and, even if it wasn’t right, that they need to keep up a united front until Trump and other right-wing demagogues have been defeated. In effect, Trump’s victory, and the electoral victories of other populist parties and causes across the West in the past 10 years or so, has empowered the regressive Left and disempowered social democrats.
In New Zealand there have been quite a few public debates around issues of freedom of speech. But in some quarters, there seems to be a deliberate ‘missing of the point’—so advocates of freedom of speech who defend another person’s right to think or state their opinion are being accused of defending the actual viewpoint, which is an entirely different thing. But that crucial point is being somehow lost. Does this simply reflect an abandonment of conceptual thinking or is it a willful conflation of the issues to distract people?

I think the Neo-Marxist, post-modernist Left has succeeded in enlisting a lot of useful idiots by persuading them that allowing non-identitarian viewpoints to be expressed is a direct threat to the security and well-being of women, people of colour, trans people, and so on. But I think it’s just a rhetorical device. It’s really just about asserting their power and delegitimising anyone who opposes them.

It strikes me that humour has become a victim of the times. Society is becoming less and less humorous and certainly there seems to be no place for humour or irony in politics on either side. If we lose the ability to make jokes or laugh at things where will that lead us?

The only humour that’s permitted is ridiculing and satirising traditional, Christian, conservative points of view. Comedians act as the tribunes of powerful elites, delegitimising anyone who challenges progressive orthodoxies. They punch down, never up. Sacha Baron-Cohen is a case in point.

You said in your piece that one of the great disappointments from you having to resign your public positions—particularly in the education field—was that you never had the opportunity to discuss the problems that you believe are afflicting Britain’s universities—soaring tuition fees, grade inflation, the growing intolerance for unorthodox ideas. Do you subscribe to the idea that ‘more is not necessarily good’?

Yes, I do. One of the consequences of 50% of school leavers going to university is that universities have ceased to be about the production and transmission of knowledge and become about instilling the ‘right’ values. I’ve just written a pamphlet for a British think tank about technical/ vocational education, arguing that we need to value it more highly and stop seeing it as just suitable for those who aren’t ‘academically bright’.

Universities have always a bastion of free thinking—where students have been encouraged to think for themselves and even come up with theories that may be disagreeable. Do you think this has changed in the last decade or so? Have universities become frightened of encouraging free thinkers?

Well, not always. Oxford and Cambridge were centres of Christian orthodoxy 500 years ago and that’s also true of a lot of Ivy League universities in the US as recently as 100 years ago. I think we’re seeing a return to that pattern, except the orthodoxy they’re expected to uphold now is secular and progressive.

It seems that we have lost our ability to reason—do you agree? And why do you think this is so? Is social media to blame?

Logic and reason are just tools of white privilege, according to the identitarian Left. You think I’m exaggerating, but that’s exactly what Brett Weinstein was told when he tried to reason with the student mob who were hounding him off campus at Ever Green State University when he refused to comply with the ‘Day of Absence’ whereby all white people were expected to remove themselves from the campus.

I want to ask you about Brexit. You believe that part of the reason why you were publicly shamed was because the British professoriat is passionately pro-EU whereas you campaigned prominently for Brexit. Watching from this side of the world, it’s interesting to see such denial among the academics and the liberal elite about the Brexit result. The idea, that all people who voted Brexit are dumb and racist and that they really didn’t understand what they were doing seems fairly offensive. But does it concern you that some people believe that the result was somehow illegitimate and by extension, referenda are also problematic? Does this kind of thinking dilute democratic principles?

What has shocked me about the reaction of the British intelligentsia in general to the EU Referendum result, is how skin deep their commitment to democracy is. They really do think they know best and that elections are all very well if the public does their bidding, but the moment things don’t go their way, the opinions of the hot poloi should be disregarded. I had encountered that attitude among European elites before, but not in Britain. It’s depressing.

Do you think that there will eventually be a backlash from people, particularly the conservative or centrist voters, who feel that they are being told what to think?

I sincerely hope so, but things are bound to get worse before they get better. If Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party wins the next general election in the UK, things would get a good deal worse and might never get better. Incredibly, I’ve encountered some political centrists in Britain who think it would be a good thing if Corbyn had a spell in Downing Street because then everyone would see how terrible the hard Left is at governing and Labour would lose the next election by a landslide and then replace Corbyn with a moderate. I expect some Mensheviks thought the same about Lenin in 1917. Once the hard Left gets its hands on the levers of power it’s not going to relinquish them without an almighty fight.

How confident are you that you will again be able to hold public positions? Are you optimistic about the future?

I don’t think I’ll ever be appointed to a public position again by an Establishment political party. The only way is if I ran for election and won, or campaigned for an anti-Establishment party and it won.
Short Takes

**Caroline’s Bikini**
Kirsty Gunn

A gorgeously intoxicating new novel about the nature of love from the award-winning author of *The Big Music*. In a mischievously intelligent novel about desire, ambition, and friendship—about Petrarch and his Laura, Dante and Beatrice, Evan and Caroline—the acclaimed Kirsty Gunn explores the nature of courtly love in a modern world not celebrated for its restraint and abstraction.

*Allen and Unwin*

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**Severance**
Ling Ma

A frightening and at times darkly humourous post-apocalyptic novel set in Manhattan after a plague of biblical proportions sweeps the world. Severance is both a send up and takedown of the rituals, routines and missed opportunities of contemporary life as well as being a deadpan satire, a moving family story and a tribute to the connections (both on line and real world) that drive us to do more than just survive.

*Text Publishing*

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**In Pursuit of Civility**
Keith Thomas

In this hefty tome, Keith Thomas explores what the English thought it meant to be ‘civilised’ and how upper ranks of society have sought to distinguish themselves from their social inferiors by developing distinctive forms of moving, speaking, and comporting themselves—and how in return, the ‘common’ people developed their own forms of civility. *In Pursuit of Civility* transforms our understanding of the past and in so doing, raises important questions as to the role of manners in the modern world.

*Yale University Press*

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**The Death of Truth**
Michiko Kakutani

The Pulitzer Prize winning critic, Michiko Kakutani gives an impassioned critique of the West’s retreat from reason. The book explores why truth has become an endangered species and identifies the cultural forces that have contributed to this gathering storm. Kakutani is a former New York Times critic and in this book offers a provocative diagnosis of our current condition and gives insights into how we can best navigate these post-truth times.

*Harper Collins*

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**Nervous States—How Feeling Took Over the World**
William Davies

In this bold and far-reaching exploration of our new political landscape, William Davies reveals how feelings have come to reshape our world. Drawing on history, philosophy, psychology and economics, he shows how some of the fundamental assumptions that have traditionally defined the modern world are now dissolving. In a book of profound insight and breadth, Davies reveals the origins of this new political reality where the division between mind and body, war and peace have led to nervous states where we are relying increasingly on feeling rather than fact.

*Jonathan Cape Publisher*

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**Breaking News**
Alan Rusbridger

Reflecting on his twenty years as editor of The Guardian, Alan Rusbridger offers a stirring defense of why quality journalism matters now more than ever. He looks at the disruptive forces that have seen a decline in both standards and public trust and offers an urgent examination of the past, present and future of the press and the forces that are menacing its freedom.

*Canongate UK*
You seem to be very drawn to taboo subjects. Your first book dealt with being a stepmother and now you’re completely shaking up the way we think about women’s sexuality…you do seem to go for these subjects.

I was thinking about that recently about how I am really drawn to women we love to hate. You really are.

Yes, women who are lightning rods for our culture and our individual resentment and rage. I think I want to do that because I sense that if we understand our feeling about these women it will tell us a lot about ourselves and our society.

Is it also that these women have always been around—the mythology of the bad woman.

One of the things we most love to hate as both a cultural signifier and a real person is the adulteress. One of the things I realised as I was considering this book is that it does really fit into the wheelhouse of my fascination with women who trigger us but I realised as I started poking around into the subject that there has been so much change in the topography of how we think about female infidelity over the past 40 years—at least in the US. The term adulteress has fallen out of favour and now so many things are shifting in terms of consensual non-monogamy and polyamory as social movements that our whole notion of female infidelity has undergone a big change. So, in addition to the adulteress being a very triggering figure, she’s also one who’s undergone massive cultural change and yet a lot of bias still exists. I like to say that our ability to tolerate female infidelity is probably our best metric to measure whether we have the ability to really be a gender equal society. Wherever you see really violent reactions against female infidelity, you will generally see very violent reactions against female autonomy.

The idea of the adulteress being a ‘triggering’ type—women adulterers have always been judged much more harshly than men—and interestingly, by women. Women are very hard on each other.

Any time you risk the wrath of the greater male coalition—not only will men come after you but so will women who have a vested interest in being on the right side of the greater male coalition and male power so it’s not unusual at all and you saw it in my country when 52 percent of white women voted for Donald Trump. They decided that supporting that version of masculinity more suited their self-interest than taking the risk of making a woman the most powerful person in the world.

Well, that automatically brings up memories of Monica Lewinsky who of course had an affair with Bill Clinton and was judged tremendously harshly. It always seemed very unfair as she was young woman, who was single—it wasn’t actually her who was committing adultery—and yet she bore the entire brunt.

That bit of hypocrisy is very important to understand how that has been baked into American’s historically. In Plymouth colony in the 17th century, in the first American colonies, a double standard was law and it was that a married woman who stepped out was guilty of adultery because she was another man’s property. A married man who stepped out—if he had a sexual liaison with a woman who was not married—he was not guilty of adultery. He was guilty of fornication, which was a lesser crime.

That’s ludicrous.

It’s funny and at the same time it tells you about the double standard in the United States.

And that double standard presumably is because the married woman is viewed as a chattel of the man.

That’s right. So, what a woman was doing in Plymouth colony if she was married and had an extra marital relationship, she was violating the social contract that said that women were the property of men and she was violating the individual contract with her husband wherein she acknowledged that she was his property—whereas a married man who was stepping out with a married man—that was adultery too because he was not violating his marriage, but another man’s property rights.

We see the echo of that in the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and I should say as an aside, that Monica Lewinsky is having a complete phoenix-like rebirth in the United States.

So, she should, but it’s way overdue.

She really paid a terrible price for being female and sexual.

And for the sin of youth as well. One of the things that really bothered me about this was how young she was and yet she was the one who was supposed to know better, and was the one who had to live with this shaming for twenty odd years.
There’s an enshrined historical tradition of that and she was basically Hester Prinn [The Scarlet Letter] for many years. Through pure force and determination and bravery, she’s now on the other side of that and she is having her moment and I think it is richly deserved.

She was always labelled a temptress. That cultural myth of the temptress is the the most that really makes society nervous? You can’t talk anything my view and through my lens without taking about ecological context—so to answer it, I need to tether it to those specific things. The idea of the temptress I see rooted in the myth of Jezebel and how in the Bible, Jezebel was a woman who was a Baal priestess and she came from Phoenicia and she was enlightened and spoke many languages and she had political and cultural power in Phoenicia—in the Bible when we’re trying to consolidate power for men—what happens to Jezebel who was a powerful woman and who had property rights—what happens to her in the Bible is that she then becomes a harlot and all her power and strength gets transmogrified into her being sexually licentious. The temptress is a trope we use to coerce women who we find too powerful—that’s the way I read that.

It’s fascinating.

To me it all has to do with fears of progeniture which started happening with the rise of plough agriculture and the rise of the notion of property and a female propriety prior to 10 or 12 thousand years ago, when women gathered and provided as many calories as men did. They had as much power and progeniture was not an issue and women had sexual autonomy that they don’t in many places today.

It leads us on to the more startling claims in your book which deal with the idea of female sexual autonomy—and female sex drive and infidelity. What surprised you most when you were researching this book?

What surprised me the most was the persistence even among very educated and enlightened and progressive people—the persistence of the myth—that men are more naturally sexual and promiscuous than women in the face of new and compelling data. I was most surprised at the intransigence of this strictly rigid, gender scripting about essential difference in sexual behaviour between men and women in spite of emerging fact. Some of these facts about females tending towards promiscuity has been around primatologists for the better part of 40 years, so it was remarkable to see how bias exists even when there’s really strong data against it. The other really surprising thing to me honestly was that all the good science in social science being done right now is about being in the mood, when the time is right, when you start to fool around, when you see a pornographic image that appeals to you—you feel the desire then.

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It was being measured incorrectly because male scientists were the ones measuring it.

So, they were measuring it against male libido?

Here’s how they were doing it: They were measuring spontaneous desire. Spontaneous desire is when you’re just sitting there, and you suddenly think “Boy, I’d like to have sex”. On that one single of metric of desire, it seems men outpace women. However, when we measure something called triggered or responsive desire—and this was a phenomenon discovered by a female sex researcher named Rosemary Bassoon and she said there are different styles of desire and different types of desire and one is spontaneous and then there’s responsive desire—and responsive desire is about being in the mood, when the time is right, when you start to fool around, when you see a pornographic image that appeals to you—you feel the desire then.

When we measure responsive desire, female desire and arousal is every bit as strong as male desire according to very respected sex researchers including Meredith Chivers. Why didn’t we know this for so long? Because the study of female sexuality was being conducted through the lens of maleness. It’s not that they were bad scientists or bad men, but gender is a distorting lens and so the more female researchers that come into the field, the more we are able to correct bias. We start to see a correction.

That research was flawed because it was being looked at under a male microscope—so to speak.

And people like to say, “well now it’s going to have a feminist bias,” and that’s not true at all. What’s happening is we are taking bias out of the science, we’re not putting in new bias. Basically, the story of female sexuality has been narrated by men for hundreds of years and suddenly we’re having what I call the great correction when female primatologists and female sex researchers are saying “this is what the data shows”.

It’s really exciting and that’s what I wanted to do with Untrue—you know most people are happy to let psychologists talk about sex and infidelity and female sexuality and as I felt about stepmothering—that’s not enough. You need more than psychology, are you kidding me? Let’s bring these other discourses to bear on the conundrum of female sexuality and female infidelity because primatologists can tell us that for non-female human primates that promiscuity was a really smart adaptation sociologists can tell us that women step out, not because they’re looking for emotional connection, but simply because they want sex.

No one’s been brave enough to say that.

I don’t know about you, but I was told time and time again that when women cheat it was because they were looking for emotional connection.

Yes, that’s what we hear all the time.

The hell they are. Actually, men and women’s motivations to step out are not that different from one another according to the experts I spoke to. This great correction is happening in many different areas, not just psychology, so I wanted to bring them together.
When you’re talking about promiscuity and you say there is research that shows that females of many species have evolved to be promiscuous—that goes against what we know—or have been led to believe—in evolutionary science. That women aren’t naturally promiscuous because it can lead to insecurity of relationships—particularly when it comes to protection of offspring—so we’re looking at that through a new lens?

We are. And that’s thanks to primatologists like Meredith Small and Sarah Hrdy and what they found that they were being told again and again that males benefit from mating multiply. They can impregnate as many females as possible, so of course males are promiscuous in every species. Females on the other hand get pregnant or they lay eggs, and then they have to be broody, or lactate if they’re mammals, so we thought it’s just natural that females are monogamous, right? Wrong.

For the last 40 years primatologists have been observing the behaviour of non-human female primates and what they have found is that when ecological circumstances are right, females will mate multiply. It will be beneficial to them.

In what way?

One way is if you’re mating multiply, as a female—you’re hedging against male infertility. If you have just one male mate and he’s sterile, your reproductive success has gone down the tubes. But if you’re mating multiply then your hedging your bets and one of those guys is likely not to be sterile.

The second thing you get is heterozygosity—which means you’re genetically dissimilar enough to somebody that you will have a healthy pregnancy and offspring. We’re not just creatures of biology and sometimes we might be attracted to a person to a person who’s not the best match for us in terms of heterozygosity—sometimes were attracted to people who are very similar to us and this doesn’t result in healthy pregnancy but if you’re having multiple partners then this risk is lessened.

And I suppose if you go back to hunter gatherer society where people are living in very small communities then that makes a lot of sense, because the smaller the community, the closer the genetic similarity—so you’d be smart to try and broaden that gene pool.

The third reason why being promiscuous can be a really great reproductive strategy for females of many different species, is that it can cloud the issue of paternal certainty so that the male will be less likely to commit infanticide if he believes there’s a chance that this offspring may be his. He’ll be more likely to provision the female who may be the mother of his offspring and he’ll be more likely to protect and provision that offspring, so for those three reason it was really adaptive in many contexts for females to be promiscuous and I want to get to your point because it was adaptive to be promiscuous, because you could improve your reproductive success through promiscuity it meant that we evolved an appetite for novelty.

Right. And variety presumably?

There is nothing that excites a human primate more than a novel male, one that she has never seen before. The most diligent, assiduous Macaque mother who lets her offspring ride ventrally on her tummy, when most moms are saying ‘no, come on, you have to ride jockey style’—the ones who are still nursing late, these mothers, when you introduce a novel male into the enclosure they will put that baby down so fast and start chasing the novel male around and soliciting copulation from him. The best mother in our evolutionary history, was a promiscuous mother.

So, it was far from rare then, even in our own history of evolution?

It was the smartest reproductive strategy that a female could use and so we have yet to deal with the fact that our environment has changed but we have evolved appetites that primed us for promiscuity because at one point promiscuity was really beneficial for us.

But not anymore?

Now we live in a time where it can be lethal. In the United States the mass shootings that are not school shootings, are shootings by men who are angry at women who have left them for other men. In the United States in a recent study of incarcerated men nearly 100% of the incidences of domestic violence were when a man just suspected his female partner of infidelity. So, the United States, like rural areas in Latin America, where crimes of passion are still tolerated—where men are still allowed to kill women who cheat on them—or in countries where there are honour killings it is because women are sexual. What I am thinking about is how the mass shootings in the United States and the rates of serious and lethal domestic violence against women who are sexually autonomous tell us that in our current circumstances female infidelity can be lethal and the United States is not nearly enlightened as we would like the rest of the world to believe on that measure of how we tolerate female infidelity.

Going back to your point about the best Macaque mothers dropping their babies in favour of the novel male—that would also go some way in explaining why we have these cases of mothers being involved with unsuitable men and allowing their children to be put in harm’s way.

I think that primatology has a lot to teach us about the evolutionary pre-history of female sexuality and then I would say that context tells us a lot. Context of our current ecology tells us a lot about how female choice has been controlled and coerced so when women are married to me who are violent towards them for example that just goes to show that women are so controlled in ways that are relatively recent, that kind of dependency on men is only 10000 years old. Inequality and female dependency on men is an aberration in the very long human calendar—it is relatively new. Our deep evolutionary story was more about equality and female autonomy.

You don’t really see it in the natural environment where primates suffer domestic violence.

That’s right, and a lot of contemporary anthropologists believes believe that hunter gatherer societies are a good window into how we lived—mainly in the Pleistocene. What we see is that many hunter gatherer societies are characterised by what we call radical egalitarianism—women make equal contributions to subsistence, they were relatively non-hierarchical societies, women have strong clout within the culture, they have important say, for example, about when the band leaves one camp and goes to another camp, whether and how someone will be punished for an infraction, what people will eat, how dilemmas will be resolved.

In those contexts, those are very gender equal societies, and this is another reason why some anthropologists believe our evolutionary history was a lot more egalitarian than the world that we’re leaving in now. And it’s no surprise that in these societies women have much more sexual autonomy than you and I do or that many women in the industrialised west do because our recent history here is one of dependency and that’s an aberration.
And, societal judgement—if you are a woman who expresses her sexuality in an autonomous way, you are still thought of as being a slut.

There is lethal violence and then there are other containment strategies to coerce and control female sexuality. One is lethal violence which is literally killing the women who has sexual autonomy, and another might be slut shaming, name calling.

By women as well.

By women as well because we're back to the point that we've been unequal since plough agriculture, we've been unequal for 10 thousand years and many women are saying “Let me line up with and align myself and my interests with the greater male coalition because that feels safer and more expedient” and yes, those women will judge other women very harshly.

One of the things that is really fascinating in your book is the research that shows that men's rates of infidelity haven't budged since 1990—so they've stayed around the same level, whereas women's rates of infidelity have shot up 40%. What happened in 1990?

That's a really good question and a lot of sociologists have been trying to figure that out. In cultures where there are high rates of female sexual autonomy you always see that women have very high degrees of political participation and they also have very high rates of labour force participation.

So, what some sociologists believe is that the more women move into the work force the more they have access to their own resources, their own money, the more that they could take a risk like this, the more they will. That doesn't mean that poor women don't cheat because female infidelity happens across class distinctions, it happens across racial categories and cultures—there is no way to extinguish female infidelity even in cultures where women are put to death for it, but women are more likely, when they run the calculus of whether this is a risk worth taking to say 'yes, if things blow up they can support themselves' and it's pretty much that simple.

Another thing that sociologists think is that as women were moving more into the work force they had more opportunities because they were travelling for business and if you have a partner and you're in a context where there's lot of potential romantic and sexual partners and then you have opportunities say with travel, then sociologists believe this could likely account for it.

I was wondering whether it had anything to do with the rise in pornography from the nineties on. Because women do watch pornography...

100 percent they do.

And that's another one of those myths that only men watch pornography for stimulation—because women do and many of them enjoy it.

And some women watch it a lot and have done for quite some time. I remember in the 1970s a debate about whether women are visual creatures. The argument was that men were very visual and enjoyed visual stimuli and women don't. Are you kidding me? That's where we were in 1970 and we're still saying that men are more visual.

That is still one of those things we hear reinforced time and again. We hear that women prefer erotica. We get the idea that women are more interested in storytelling, and that they are more refined than men in their preference—I don't know that this is true.

What is true is that constraint is very powerful and when you feed men and women a steady diet of lies about differences between women and men, it will impact on self-reporting. If women believe that they're supposed to tell an interviewer that they are cheating—which is a term I really don't like—because they wanted an 'emotional connection', if they're taught every day that that's why women cheat, they are going to say that's why they are cheating. If men are taught that men are naturally cheaters and that they step out because they want sex, and variety and novelty and they're taught that they want that more than women do, then they're going to report that that's why they do it. Men and women internalise these scripts and answer the way they think they're supposed to answer. So, the bias is tremendous, but to your point that people say that women prefer erotica to pornography—well, I think this is like talking about female sexuality in general, that the more women we get making female-centric pornography and the more pornography is made for women and by women and about women, the more we will see that our presumption that there's some gender difference in liking pornography will essentially go away.

What we hear is that women directed pornography still follows that wisdom—so it will be things like erotic massage, soft BDSM—think 50 Shades of Grey.

You know what, in 2016 Pornhub, which is a very popular porn site here it always reports the categories that women search for the most—and you know what the most popular categories that women liked the most?

I don't know... Bondage?

Gangbang. Group sex. Rough sex. And BDSM. In Pornhub's reporting of these most popular searched categories by women they asked a female psychologist what she made of this and she said "Yes, women are seeking connecting and intimacy in sex.” And I thought "I'm sorry, did you see the part about gangbang and rough sex?" Women have desires when they are free of constraint, that will utterly confound and undermine this script that we have internalised that women seek connection only and that men seek sex only—our motivations are very similar. Doctor Elisha Walker found that a lot of women that she studied who were stepping out, were happy in their marriages, but they were seeking an outside partner and Dr Walker called these partnerships 'relationships of sexual utility.' You try telling those women that they're seeking emotional intimacy and connection and they're only cheating because they're not getting that in their marriages, and they would laugh at you. But for a long time, scientists weren't interested in talking to these women, and we weren't hearing their stories because the story of female sexuality was being told by men.

I think also the reasons that women are unfaithful are the same reasons that men are to an extent. One of them, I imagine, is the wish to feel desirable. Women like to feel sexually desired by men.

That's right, and my book explains that actually women, more than men, struggle in long term partnered relationships. And many experts told me that if you have a man and a woman in a long-term relationship, in the aggregate if the man is getting regular sex from his regular partner—he will report high levels of sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, whereas in the aggregate, women who are in long term partnerships, and getting sex regularly with their regular partner, are much less likely to report sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction.
What is that about?
Well, we used to think it was that women were just less sexual than men and they stop liking sex. Martina Anderson said ‘Wait a second, if these women had a novel partner, their sexual desire would come flaming back’. So, what many of these researchers are finding is that women have a need for novelty and variety that is greater than men and so monogamy is more difficult for women. And certainly, what they’re prepared to say is that long-term relationships are especially hard not on male desire but on female desire.

Gosh, that’s a complete 360 degree turn from what we think right now isn’t it?
Doesn’t it blow your mind, that all those married women who say “Well, I just don’t like sex”, actually do—they just don’t like sex with the same person over and over again. It’s harder for women. This is why I call it the great correction—these social scientists, their data are changing everything we’ve been taught.

Everything. That’s a complete 360 degree turn from what we think currently. I guess that also says something for older women—the received wisdom once again is that after menopause your libido decreases, and older women don’t enjoy sex as much as younger women.

I think about Nisa, who was a Kulum woman and the anthropologist Marjorie Shotak who went to Botswana to study the sexuality of hunter gatherers. She found that Nisa, who was one of the women she talked to the longest and when Nisa talked about her old age—she was in her 50s and was considered very old—she had a much younger lover and she had several lovers and she talked about how she still enjoyed sex and she really enjoyed this younger lover because basically she said he could go all night and she enjoyed her older lover because he was extremely skilled and had experience—and I thought ‘this is what we’re not talking about enough.’

It’s even thinking differently about older women not being shocked at the idea of sexuality. I used to live in a house with my grandmother and we lived by the beach and so lots of my teenage friends would come by to surf and we had an outdoor shower in the back yard. One day a male friend of mine stripped off naked and had a shower and I was horrified in case my teenage friends would come by to surf and we had an outdoor shower in the back yard. One day a male friend of mine stripped off naked and had a shower and I was horrified in case my grandmother saw him. Later on, I apologised to her and she said, with a glint in her eye, “Oh it was lovely to see a young man naked. It’s been a long time since I saw that.”

That’s such a lovely story. When I was at a conference recently in Philadelphia, several researchers were talking about their elderly relatives who were still having an active sex life into their 80s and 90s. Here’s the thing; we do know that our libidos change over our lifetimes; we do know they tend to be stronger when we’re younger—other than that we don’t know nearly enough about the stages and whether there are developmental stages of female sexuality and what they are, and we need someone to care about female sexuality enough to start doing the research. What can a 90-year-old woman expect? What are the ranges of female desire when a woman is in her 80s? What are the ranges of her desire when she’s in her 60s? There might be lots of surprises and we need to care enough to do the research and I think the great corrections that’s going on right now about female sexuality were hoping to see a shift in information we get—like what are our grandmothers sexuality? How did my sexuality change from my 30s to my 60s? We don’t know enough and we don’t know because it hasn’t been a priority because we have studied sexuality through the lens of male desire and we are only starting to study it through female experience now.

I think we’ve also only studied it through the lens of youth. Perhaps as a society we need to accept and embrace the idea that older people are still sexual beings.

As the United States and the industrial west in general and as life spans increase, we will get to a place where people are simply demanding to know more about themselves and doctors must keep up. What we have in the US especially among the very wealthy is the idea of prolonging youth and the markers and behaviours of youth and sexuality is going to be something that people are going to be very interested in experiencing as long as they can.

It’s a slightly different take—but do you think that if society was more accepting of older women still being seen and appreciated as sexual beings—there would be less of a focus on trying to retain youth? I see women having surgery and cosmetic procedures trying to regain their youth and it seems to me that competing against actual twenty or thirty-year-old women is ludicrous. Youth is youth and you can’t imitate it—so why not just celebrate your experience?

We live in the industrialised west and I tether this to the legacy of plough agriculture which we’re still living in our weird society, and in which women became devalued relative to men except as nubile and fertile women. We’re still living it. All the surgeries are a symptom of this and the moment when we transitioned to female dependency and women because as best, secondary producers, they became increasingly dependent and lost status. I see plastic surgery as a symptom of that of women trying to develop a counter strategy to men only valuing them for youth and fertility. This is one of the things I hate to hear—that all over the world women like men with resources and men like women who are young and fertile—that is not all over the world it is predominately in the west and places where plough agriculture dominates.

It’s not natural then?
We have a lot of narratives about what men and women naturally want which are total BS and I’m really glad these women are helping to drive the correction with the data out there.

I’m in my mid forties now and sometimes I look in the mirror and go ‘Yuck, look at my forty-something face’ but then I stop and think, ‘but I’m not twenty anymore, I’ve been twenty I had a great time, but it’s okay that I’m forty and looking my age’. I look at women who have had piles of surgery and procedures and the strange thing is they still look like their age. They don’t look twenty, they look like 50 or 60-year-old women who have had work done and I kind of think ‘What’s the point?’ Youth is for the young. You can imitate it, but you can’t get it back. So, let the young people enjoy having their youth and let us enjoy having a bit of age.

We need to value people no matter what age you are.

And that being in your 40s or 50s or 60s and beyond is still sexy and desirable. I couldn’t agree more. I always say that the lens of anthropology is such a great way to observe things because the way an anthropologist would observe this is there is a place in the world where women who have had multiple children for example are expected to look and act like women who have never had children. Through the lens of anthropology this is a bizarre state of affairs but to us it’s become normalised. Of course, young women are unique and are in many cultures considered uniquely beautiful, but it’s only our culture that has decided that it is decided that it timeless and all over the world that women are after men’s money and men are after women’s fertility. This is only a narrative in societies that are so gender unequal as ours. You’re in New Zealand, right?
Yes.
Right, so your Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern—what you have going on there is so wonderful and helpful and I don’t have any reliable statistics on infidelity in New Zealand

Oh, you can be sure it happens here too.
Well, in general female infidelity is one of the best metrics of gender parity—the only thing more audacious than a woman taking control of her sexual autonomy—the only thing more audacious than that is a woman saying, “I’m going to lead a country”.

And be a new mother at the same time.
Countries where women lead and countries where women earn, countries where women have parity with men in those ways tend to be countries where you see higher rates of infidelity and higher rates of women having children outside of the institution of marriage.

That’s the wonderful thing and probably still shocking to some, is that Jacinda is the Prime Minister but she’s also an unmarried and pregnant young woman.
It’s absolutely such a fantastic thing. She sums up the lessons of anthropology that female equality and female freedom is really tethered to political participation, that’s when you get sexual autonomy too.

You’ve written three books now that touch on or are about loss and grief—yet every one touches on a different aspect of loss. Is that what’s surprising about the nature of grief—that it can have so many facets?
I think grief is much deeper than we realise. It extends into our lifetimes in ways that we can’t always anticipate. Truthfully, I’ve found a lot of beauty in the way that grief transforms us and the ways that it asks us to step into ourselves and learn about ourselves and it’s a continuing process.

My first big loss was 20 years ago when my Mom died and it’s still something that continues to inform the way that I live in the world.

Is there actually an end to grief? Is there ever a point at which you say “Okay, I’m over it now. All good.”?
I think grieving is one thing, the way loss shapes us is another. I’m not actively grieving any longer. I think that grieving is something we go through for a period of time—it’s different for everybody—and it’s generally longer than people think it will be, but I don’t currently feel grief right now.

I suppose grief can be for things that are simply nostalgic. You can have grief for the fact that you have certain memories, but they won’t be replicated in the future.
I’m one of the most nostalgic people you’ll ever meet. Before something has even happened, I’m nostalgic for it.
Do you think that arises out of your experience of having suffered so much loss in your life?
It does but it’s not a negative thing. It’s often just that I appreciate things so much. I appreciate how ephemeral life experiences and moments are and I think that for me, is like a nostalgia. Sometimes it’s anxiety provoking but more often I find myself just wanting to soak up every moment we have because they are so short lived, and we don’t know whether we’ll have them again and I don’t want to take anything for granted. Loss has taught me that.

Are you sentimental as well?
I’m not as sentimental as you might think but I definitely am very aware of when things are happening that are important and when we should concentrate on feeling things.

The new book is about anxiety and that seems like a very pertinent subject to be discussing at the moment as we seem to be living in very anxiety ridden times—tell me about the new book.
Anxiety is on the uptake in our culture, period. You’re right, it seems to be everywhere, and I think some of that has to do with certain world events and the political climate right now, but I also think a lot of it has to do with technology and social media and the incredible amount of information that we’re all trying to process at any given time.

Before we’re even out of our beds in the morning we’re glancing at our phone and downloading so much information all at once. Before you’ve even gotten up, you know what your best friend is eating for breakfast, you know what the President of the United States tweeted last night, you know who died—it’s so much information to take in. All that information creates thoughts which create emotions and so before you’ve even made coffee you could be spinning out from all the anxiety. Whereas 20 years ago we weren’t processing so much information so rapidly and I think we need to learn how to balance that information upload with things like meditation and mindfulness and taking time away from social media and news information which is starting to rise, I think that realisation is starting to come.

In that sense I think anxiety has grown a lot larger, but anxiety and grief are another beast entirely—it’s a very particular facet of grief and loss to begin to experience anxiety following when we lose someone we love.

Or something. As you were saying around the broader issues in society—if you feel you’re losing something important to you in your own community, whatever it may be, there is grief about that which can lead to anxiety.

I think that a lot of anxiety is just fear. It’s fear of more loss. It’s fear of vulnerability, it’s fear of the unknown, it’s fear that something bad could happen at any moment, and that things are beyond our control. Loss serves to teach us that, over and over again—that’s we’re not in control, that we can’t design our lives no matter how hard we try or how much we want to, we cannot do it. Once you’ve really been hit hard by a loss of any sort, it’s just a big reminder that it can happen again and that can be scary.

I think the writer Andrew Solomon put it well when he said ‘grief is about what you’ve lost in the past, anxiety is about the things you may lose in the future’—I’m paraphrasing there, but that’s the gist of it.

Exactly. When you’re grieving, there comes this fear of more loss. It’s my greatest anxiety that I will have to go through again what I’ve already been through, but I know I will have to grieve again, but I don’t want to do it. It was so painful, and it was so frightening, and it was such a relief to get to the other side of it, I never want to have to go through it again.

But then you do go through it again—that’s the terrible thing about life isn’t it? I know recently, you lost your cat for instance, and there’s grief associated with that, and actually, I’d like to get your thoughts on grief over the death of pets, because I think there’s still a feeling in broader society that pets don’t matter as much as humans and that the grief you feel around the loss of a pet is not comparable to grief of losing a person—but in some cases it is comparable isn’t it?
I think you can really grieve a pet just as much as you can grieve a person and I’ve seen it in so many people. It’s something that’s hard to talk about that other people don’t always want to talk about because they feel embarrassed about, but it is a very real grief that occurs. I think that with pets there’s an unconditional love there, and there’s also caretaking qualities around loving pets and sometimes we feel not just a loss of companionship but a feeling that we didn’t take care of another creature as well as we wanted to.

I just want to go back to what you were saying around social media and the accompanying anxiety it has provoked—but another aspect of social media that I personally feel uncomfortable with is around grief and the fact that it seems to have changed what people do when other people are grieving. So, once when a person had died, the mourner would be visited or have food dropped around to them, or they could even expect a sympathy card with perhaps a message written in it—nowadays someone says they’ve lost a loved one and people just comment on their feed with ‘so sorry for your loss’ and that’s it.
I think that extends to everything on social media these days—we don’t even write thank you notes for baby showers or wedding gifts anymore. I think there is a larger aspect to how social media is changing reactions to grief, which I think is largely positive. I hear what you’re saying in that we’re not showing up as much physically for people, but I think that on the flip side of that people are finding a broader sense of community within their grief process. When they are posting about it, when they find online communities of people who are going through similar experiences—for example there’s a huge community of women online who have been through miscarriages and stillbirths and they find a lot of support for each other there. I think there are some people who feel comfortable to share a little bit more about their grief process online and find some sympathy and help in ways that weren’t available before social media, so I think that it’s both things and I think grief can be really isolating and really isolating and I do like the fact that social media can provide a space for people to not feel quite as lonely as they might otherwise feel.

That’s a good point. Do you think anxiety is worse when the death of a loved one is sudden?
Not necessarily. I think there are a lot of complications that come with sudden deaths, there’s often a lot of unresolved things that could have been done or said, there’s confusion, there’s also some fear that anything can happen in any other area of your life. But I’ve seen deep anxiety in people as well with people who have gone through losses through long term illnesses—again it’s the fear of the unknown and of what’s to come.
You do a lot of work with grieving people, but you’ve also done a lot of work with hospice care haven’t you?
I have, for over ten years.

So, do you find that anxiety tends to be the domain of those who are left behind—or is there a lot of anxiety with people who are dying?
Yes, absolutely. There is some really interesting stuff happening there. There has been a fascinating recent study around psilocybin. They’re doing these trials on people who are dying and have this anxiety about death and they’re administering psilocybin to them and there’s been profound changes in their levels of anxiety and their levels of peace. It’s this fear of where are we going next? We don’t have these mass religions that we used to have, people are finding there’s much more existentialism and agnosticism and so when people are dying, they really don’t know what to believe, or even if they believe in anything. One of the chapters in my book is around doing some work around that—figuring out what you do believe in. What would be helpful in terms of spirituality.

That was the topic of your second book—what happens after we die.
That was borne out of my own anxiety. I was becoming a mom and I had this extreme anxiety that I was either going to lose my children or die myself and that caused me to look into my own spirituality.

And did that help?
It helped enormously. If you think about it, and you have no firm ideas about what you actually believe about what happens next—and I think a lot of people don’t—that can be very anxiety provoking when you’re facing death or thinking about it or confronted with it in some way.

In terms of your own experience looking in the afterlife—did you find something to believe in?
It really softened my anxiety and I found some things to hold on to that made me feel there is more beyond this lifetime and that we do have connections that extend and expand beyond our current set of expectations of what it means to be connected to someone in the physical form.

Now you also recently wrote an essay on guilt and regret and why it’s very important to let go of these emotions, but it’s not that easy is it?
It’s not. I really have yet to come across someone who hasn’t experienced some amount of guilt and regret and remorse after losing somebody they love. It’s just kind of impossible to lose someone you love and not have something that’s still unresolved. I think that working through those things is an important part of the process and it’s also important for relieving anxiety. Once we lose somebody we have the sense that we can no longer make amends and we can’t resolve the guilt or apologise because the person’s not actually here, but that’s not actually true. There are a lot of things that people can do even after someone dies.

So, what would you suggest those things are?
The biggest piece to this is self-compassion and recognising how human we all are. We all make mistakes—there’s absolutely no way of coming through life without making lots of mistakes. Learning how to have compassion for yourself as a human being and then using those experiences to be a better human being, not just ignoring them or trying to make them go away. It’s a great way to learn how to make different choices the next time.

What about the complicated issues around mothers and daughters and the fact that this particular dynamic is very complex. I wonder if there is an added level of grief associated with daughters who have tempestuous relationships with their mothers—does this necessarily lead to complications with the grieving process.
I think so. I work a lot with daughter’s who have lost their moms from anywhere at childbirth right up to their 40s and 50s—it’s my predominant client base and like you said, it’s a really complex relationship. It’s been a long time now since I had my own mom, but I’ve been a mother myself now for over a decade and there’s a real identity link there. It’s different from fathers and daughters, it’s different from mothers and sons. We really identify with our mothers, but we also push against that identity. So, there’s many aspects where we don’t want to identify with our mothers and our daughters don’t want to identify with us and at the same time what I’ve realised how much mothers do that daughters don’t actually realise and when that mother is gone that daughter then realises how much her mother actually did for her and how much she took her for granted. But it’s impossible to really understand all that when you’re in it and you’re fighting against it and struggling against and then suddenly it’s over and you feel that relationship is never able to be resolved or you can’t talk about it and you can’t continue to grow the relationship and there’s a lot of deep grief that comes with that.

There will be people who deal with grief differently. Again, the received wisdom is that if you lose a parent or somebody close to you then there’s an expected level of grief that you feel must be observed. What about the people who don’t feel that expected level of grief and society judges that they’re not grieving enough?
That’s very real too, and not everyone needs to grieve in the same way and not everyone needs to grieve deeply. I think sometimes it’s either that they don’t have a very close relationship, or maybe it’s that they have had a very close relationship and they don’t need to process it as much as they think they’re supposed to and that’s okay too.

So, it’s not that they’re cold hearted?
No, they’re not cold hearted. Sometimes we’ve done grieving before someone dies, just for the relationship. Sometimes there’s more to come later and while we think we’re good now, it shows up later in unexpected places.

Sometimes when people have had a troubled relationship with another person, and that person dies, the person left shows quite a lot of anger and  I wonder is that anger actually a form of grief?
Absolutely, anger is a huge part of grief. Anger is a really powerful emotion and I think in some places it’s really warranted and in other places it serves to cover up a deeper sadness that someone’s tried to avoid. I think that anger is like a physical thing, and while grief is very heavy and debilitating, anger is motivating. In some ways it’s easier to hang on to it but often the only way to really let it go is to peer beneath it and I believe anger is almost always sadness or fear that someone is trying to avoid.
It’s not something we should be afraid of—it is part of the process?

It is but I do think there’s a time and place when we need to start thinking about letting go of it.

I had a client who was a widower and he was having angry outbursts at other cars on the highway
and at people who cut in front of him at Starbucks and that kind of anger is not healthy. He was
bottling up a lot so what we did was work to soften some of that and in doing that, we had to
look at what was underneath and that was this huge feeling of vulnerability and he was carrying
this. The anger felt like a great mask for making him feel more powerful in the face of such
vulnerability.

I’m not sure how old this man was but it leads me to the elderly, and obviously they are the
people who most likely the ones in our society who probably think about death and face it
more than the rest of face it—so there’s probably a lot they could teach us—and yet they are
the most badly treated in our society. Should we be doing better?

I don’t think we do a very good job at all in our culture. There’s such a lack of community these
days and often families don’t live close to each other and in a lot of instances families are spread
across the world. Adult siblings are living thousands of miles apart from each other, families are
raising children without this sense of family cohesiveness and we’re not taking care of our elders
the way we used to by keeping them as part of the immediate family and keeping them in the
family home and that is a very real issue. When I was working in hospice, I can’t tell you how
many patients we had in nursing homes who felt really abandoned by their families, who had
nobody around them. It was heart-breaking.

And we have a society that likes to put our elderly away—is that part of society’s fear of death?
That by hiding our old people away in rest homes we don’t have to look at the process of decay
and dying?

I think we try to tidy up death in general, we keep it under wraps. It used to be that people died
in their own home and were laid out in the parlour and there was visitation and it was much
more present in our lives than it is now. Now, you can meet lots of adults who have never even
seen a dead body and that’s not uncommon at all. That doesn’t really help us come to terms
with the fact that we’re all going to die, it doesn’t help us confront that fear, it doesn’t help us get
comfortable with that and it doesn’t help us help others.

I’ve been pregnant now three times since I’ve been working in this field and it’s always a really
interesting experience for me to be bringing a life into the world when I’m always working in the
realm of helping people out of the world and we do such a terrible job of it. On the flip side we’re
so good at baby showers and birth rituals and doulas and there’s so much around that and there’s
really nothing around death that’s comparable. It’s really a shame.

Your experience of grief has been so difficult—you lost both your parents when very young.
You were an only child and when you lost your parents you must have really felt that aloneness
that comes with death. It was terrible for you, but I want to know whether your experience of
loss has had any positive effect. For instance, you wouldn’t be working in this area, I imagine,
if you hadn’t suffered all those losses in your life?

It’s a weird double-edged sword. I would never be doing this work if I hadn’t lost my parents.
I was at an event recently and I was introduced as one of the foremost leading experts on grief
in the country and thought; ‘My god, that’s not what I set out to be when I was growing up!”
and here I am. But I love this work so much, it has been such a positive experience. People ask
me a lot if it’s depressing or heavy and yes, maybe sometimes it is, but more often than not it’s
so beautiful and such a reflection of living and love and relationships and it’s given me such an
appreciation for the time we have together and getting to love somebody and getting to have so
many experiences in life. I’ve basically been thinking I was going to die early since I was 18 when
my Mom died so I was so happy to turn 40 this year—it was really exciting. I was so excited to
make it to 40. I just got remarried, I’m pregnant with my third child and these things seem like
such gifts, but at the same time they’re also really common things that lots of people do and this
is life but when you’ve been through so much grief and loss they seem like…

Miracles? I think it’s important to remember this. I’m in my mid-forties and sometimes I look
at myself and think “Oh I hate getting old” and then I realised it’s a gift and that many people
should be celebrating those wrinkles and grey hairs—they’re signs that we’re alive.

Absolutely. It’s an amazing thing.
Women—A Photo Essay from L.A.
Duke Haney
Notables

Vale, Greg Boyed.

On August 20 one of New Zealand’s finest journalists tragically died while on holiday in Switzerland. Greg Boyed was probably best known for his television career, which spanned over two decades and included roles in news reading, producing and journalism. He was also a fine, and funny, writer with an acute sense of the absurd and a wit that could skewer with rapier-like precision, those in need of it. His death is an immense loss to the media landscape as he was one of the few journalists remaining who took a true delight in language and in crafting words that could both inform and entertain.

He was fair and decent and unpretentious, and he will be sadly missed by all who value and appreciate real skill and expertise as opposed to ‘medium talent’ (courtesy Bill Murray).

Our condolences go out to his wife, Caroline and his children Sarah and Kian.

The Children’s Bookshop – Christchurch, New Zealand

The Children’s Bookshop has been a mainstay of Christchurch for more than 30 years. Following the devastating Canterbury earthquakes, the shop had to relocate and has since been operating in various locations throughout the city.

New owners, Jude Potts, Greg Fleming and Zara Potts are determined to bring the magic of the bookshop back into children’s lives and are currently operating the store online while they find premises for the bookshop. You can find them at www.childrensbookshop.co.nz or on Facebook www.facebook.com/childrensbookshopnz/ and Instagram www.instagram.com/thechildrensbookshopchch/

Death Valley Superstars

We are looking forward to the upcoming publication of Death Valley Superstars—the new book of essays by LA writer Duke Haney. (You can see some of his LA street photography in this issue of Dear Reader Magazine).

The book contains essays of some of Hollywood's most famous faces while exploring lesser known stories about them. Duke's unique style and detective-like research makes this book a must-have for anyone interested in the history of cinema. Death Valley Superstars will be available in November 2018.

Seeking Truth

Paula Penfold

Paula Penfold is one of New Zealand’s best known investigative journalists. She’s been in the business for more than a quarter of a century and has worked in almost every medium. Over her career, she has seen journalism change in ways she would never have expected when she began on this path, but there are some things that haven’t changed for her—the basic principles of journalism: truth, fairness and accountability.

She has been instrumental in overturning miscarriages of justice —such as the Teina Pora case—a young man who served twenty years in prison for a murder he didn’t commit.

Here she speaks to Zara Potts about her career so far and the things that have—and haven’t—changed…

You’re one of NZ’s most senior Journalists—in fact, I’d say you’re arguably NZ’s best journalist. You started out in this business 28 years ago—there’s been a massive change in the way that journalism is both practised and viewed from when you began. What do you think is the biggest difference that you’ve observed in those years?

I’ve been lucky just by the sheer virtue of staying in the industry for so long that I have the freedom and autonomy to do the stories that I really want to do whereas back then it was daily news, daily cop conferences, daily court, daily council meetings and I don’t have to do those anymore unless I want to—so I am lucky that I can do that.

But there’s more to it than just staying power isn’t there? There’s the changing technology, the changing media landscape and having to navigate all those changes, but also, you’ve had to raise a family on top of this—so how does one stay stable in a landscape that’s always changing?

I think I’ve been again, lucky, with my colleagues. One of them, I’ve been working with for ten years and we’re very much a team and nothing happens without our complete involvement in the decision-making process and so I feel very supported whereas I think when you’re younger you are more on your own and therefore the desire to stay in the industry can be impacted by lots of different things, including economics. When you start out as a journalist, you’re not very well paid and so I think you need a degree of love for the job to resist the temptation to go elsewhere.
In terms of revenue—the click bait brings in revenue.

So how do you define love—what does the ‘love of it’ mean for you? Is it the fact that you have the opportunity to effect real change?

I said to somebody recently that most of the time it doesn’t feel like work for me because there’s such an incredible amount of variety. I meet so many different people. I do on occasion get the opportunity to make a difference for those people and those are the stories that I find particularly rewarding—which sounds a little bit trite – but it’s absolutely true.

And that’s the Teina Pora’s?

He would be the biggest and most recognised example but there are other stories that I’ve done—one for instance which springs to mind which was probably New Zealand’s first in depth look at self-harm, and this would have been 15 years ago and I’m still in contact with her reasonably frequently and giving her a voice which was really fundamentally important to her. It mattered to her and I really enjoy those opportunities.

So, it’s not necessarily the big headline grabbers

But the headline grabbers must be satisfying.

The Teina one was the hardest thing we’ve ever done. It was so emotional because we faced so much resistance not just from the authorities but even from our own bosses around what was deemed our ‘obsession’ with that story. It was emotional because what had happened to him was so wrong, the injustice was so deep and there was just a very high degree of difficulty in telling that story, but I feel proud of the work we did and the contribution we made to having people know about his case.

You’ve done amazingly well with that. Do you think that the climate has changed around the idea of news—particularly in this age of ‘fake news’. Has that made it harder for you to do your job?

It’s always quite difficult but there is growing cynicism around journalism and journalists and that makes it harder but I’m lucky in the job that I have that our mandate is the opposite of click bait. Our mandate is to experiment and do solid in-depth journalism so I’m less afflicted by the perception of fake news, I think.

Does it depress you, though, the idea of clickbait stories?

Oh hell, yeah.

In terms of revenue—the click bait brings in revenue.

Simple economics.

Which is depressing in itself.

It is, and it isn’t. The reality is we exist in a commercial world and when you’re not being funded by the state then you need to make it work economically. I just feel impressed and fortunate that my company sees a need for putting resources into stories, like I do, that don’t necessarily result in the most clicks.

What are your thoughts on how everyone seems to have a voice now. The advent of social media in particularly, has given a platform for anyone to tell their story in any way they like—so where does that leave people like you? You’ve traditionally been the storytellers of other peoples’ voices but are you still needed do you think? Is there still a place for traditional journalism?

Yes. Our biggest investigation last year ‘The Valley’ cost over $300,000 to do with NZ On Air funding. So yes, people can tell their own stories, but they can’t do an investigation into New Zealand’s ten-year deployment to Afghanistan, but I can do that. That plurality of voices is great. It’s a rich, textured environment now and I love reading other peoples stories about themselves but what I do is very different to that.

Do you find it though a little bit worrísimo with the sheer volume of voices that we are subjected to every day, that the rise of opinion and personal experience has become equivalent to expertise and knowledge?

I do think there are too many op-ed columns around. But that’s economics as well. Some media organisations are worse for it than others.

What do you find wor怀里some then in journalism today

One of the biggest frustrations for me became an opportunity for me. That was when myself and thirteen of my colleagues were made redundant a few years ago from Mediaworks and it was quite heartbreaking at the time and the sense of rejection—not personally but of journalism itself—was very keen. But it turned into this great opportunity that I have now in working for Stuff and being able to have our own investigative team.

But that wasn’t assured was it? At the time there was no guarantee that you were going to get a happy outcome, and in actual fact, we were seeing at that point the signs that serious news and current affairs were over.

In some respects, the broadcasters still have, although it’s changing rapidly, there’s an audience for the television broadcasters but to a large extent they have walked away from that sort of coverage. We’re still doing it online to a large audience, but there’s definitely less of it now than there was, and I do find that there is still a very real need for that kind of journalism that’s fearless in a functioning democracy is greater than ever.

But is it difficult to have fearless journalism out there and understood by the viewing public for what it is and the need for it when you have this pervasive idea of ‘fake news’ and it has to be said—there’s a reason why fake news has gained traction and that’s because there is actually quite a bit of it out there.

I think that New Zealanders who consume—and I hate the term—but my brand of journalism can distinguish. It’s clear to most people that it’s not fake news so while there is an issue—
particularly internationally—I’m not sure that it’s such an issue here. Partly because we’re a small country and people know which journalists can be trusted.

And I suppose we also have quite restrictive laws here in terms of defamation and what you can actually say, whereas America has the first amendment where they can basically say what they like.

That’s right and those protections do afford us a greater degree in knowing that what we say is going to be, at the very least, true. There is legislation that covers what I do. Having said that, there are plenty of controversial bloggers out there who don’t pay any heed to that legislation and I think people recognise that.

You think they know they difference?
In the main part, right minded people do. But I also think that some of that information, from the blogosphere is pretty dangerous and it can be frustrating when you are subjected to that kind of fake news.

What’s that like for you to find yourself, as a journalist, on the other side of those things.
I used to take it a little bit personally. Now, I just don’t look at it. I block those particular bloggers and I don’t read it and if it’s brought to my attention that’s a shame, but there is no point in wasting any energy on it, I’ve learned. And some people might say I’m naïve for not wanting to hear another voice, but really, there’s nothing intelligent in those voices. They’re just critical of me personally rather than my work.

Ad Hominem attacks.
Often, they’re actually simply criticism on the basis of me being a woman. That gives me liberty and comfort in completely disregarding it.

We’re having this discussion in society right now and the idea that some speech should be discouraged or even banned, and I’m interested in where you stand, as a journalist, on this issue of freedom of speech.
I’ve been really struggling with this discussion, to be honest.

It seems like a lot of people are—I don’t think you’re alone.
Theoretically yes, I agree with freedom of speech. But when some of it is so wrong and when people buy it then I really struggle with it. In the case of the recent Canadian visitors to New Zealand it wasn’t about free speech, it was hate speech. It was misinformed and wrong and I felt proud of the way New Zealanders stood up to it. But some Maori commentators have pointed out since—and I agree with them—that while yay, go us for taking a stand, actually there is institutional, deep racism that exists every day in this country and we need to address that, not just the one-off visiting racists.

It’s an interesting one. I’m personally a defender of free speech, and I believe that everyone has the right to express their opinions or beliefs even if they are potentially offensive. That doesn’t mean I agree with their views in any way, but I do agree they have a right to express their viewpoint.
I just fear for the damage being done though in some of these discussions where people are using absolute liberty in their right to say whatever they want when there are no checks and balances.

It can be fundamentally wrong, damaging and inciting hatred, then I think that’s where I have a real issue with it.

The other thing with that, is that by restricting it you just drive it underground and it doesn’t disappear and is it actually better to have these views aired publicly so that they can be disapproved or debated or so at the very least, you know that potentially problematic views exist?
Probably it is.

We live in interesting times.
It’s a frightening time.

Do you think it is? Why do you find it frightening?
Mostly because of what’s coming out of America.

Do you mean news-wise? Or society-wise?
I mean socially and politically. I think journalists in America are doing, under very difficult circumstances, a pretty incredible job actually of exposing things for what they are. But it’s not working.

It’s interesting if you follow some of the more vocal people who are trying desperately to expose Trump and every day they pop up on social media saying, ‘This has got to be it!’ and then it doesn’t eventuate.
It just doesn’t have any traction but the next day there’s something even bigger that happens. It’s been such a lesson though in the kind of echo chambers that we have been operating in and the risks of doing that, especially as journalists, we need to broaden our horizons in terms of who we listen to.

You’re a working professional, you know how the media operates, do you see a bit of hysteria in the Trump coverage? I’m no Trump apologist, but in all honesty, we’re not getting balanced coverage, are we? He has said that he could find the cure for cancer and still get a bad headline and there is a little bit of truth in that, don’t you think?
Well he started to get good headlines, didn’t he, in the possibility that he might be eligible for a Nobel Peace Prize and you can’t get a much better headline than that. That was a serious discussion for a while there. So, no I don’t agree with that. I think journalists are striving so hard to balance the hysteria from the other side that sometimes all the coverage is a little bit hysterical, but I think they have to pull out all the stops.

I mention it because I was reading something recently from Peter Greste, the Al Jazeera journalist who was jailed in Egypt and he made the point that press restrictions were possibly tighter under the Obama administration but yet we don’t hear that, do we?
That’s interesting.

But I do think that it’s hard for journalists because we haven’t really seen the likes of Trump before and he doesn’t play by the rules and that’s taking everyone by surprise.
I think he also has a reach that we haven’t seen before. In terms of the way he has adapted Twitter for example, but also in the way he speaks to his own audiences—we haven’t seen this before.
Although there are historic parallels with American presidents who have quick to adapt to modern technology. Think Roosevelt and radio, JFK and television and Obama with social media. Trump’s just taken it next level.

So those mainstream organisations that had that power are now terrified of being side-lined.

Are you in two minds about the Presidency? Because as a journalist—he’s a great story, right?

Yeah. But no, the personal outweighs the journalistic curiosity. Don’t get me wrong, I find it absolutely fascinating journalistically but I also personally fear for the way that politics has become so open to abuse and the terrifying erosion of rights that we’re seeing.

Let’s talk about women. How hard has it been for you being a successful woman in the media? I imagine you have had barriers that men in the same position haven’t had. Do you agree with that, or is it not an issue as far as you can tell?

I’ve had really strong role models in terms of women journalists, so I feel lucky to have had that.

I’m sure the barriers have been there in some form and I can recall some situations in my career—for instance questions in job interviews that I don’t think a man would be asked.

Like what?

Like “Do you think you’re too nice for this job?”

That’s a new one.

That’s a very gendered description—too nice.

What was your answer?

I am nice, but I think that gives people a comfort in talking to me—so I actually bought into the gendered description of my job, which is interesting. But I have had some kick ass women role models who take no prisoners. Sometimes, I also think people can underestimate you as a female journalist, some people think you might not be so tough.

Right.

That’s quite useful actually.

Have you found that that tends to be men who underestimate you?

Oh yes, for sure. All the examples I’m thinking of are older, white men.

Really.

But more fool them, because you should never go into any interview under-prepared but I’m sure there’s an element of sexism there.

What about in terms of your experiences within newsroom and the culture of newsrooms.

You’ve been in them for over 20 years, so you must have changed a lot in that time. Particularly in regard to how young women are treated.

Yeah. And thank goodness for Me Too and Times Up in that regard, because I just don’t think that anyone can get away with the type of casual sexism that they used to when I first started out.

Not just when I started out but probably for the first 10 or 15 years of my working in journalism, that kind of casual sexism or stuff that men would think was a compliment and if you didn’t take it well that was your issue, not theirs. And being inappropriate in the workplace, I just don’t think can happen now. This man said to me the other day: “Am I allowed to say that those boots are really great?”

I know! They’re in this terrible position where they just don’t know what to say!

No!

I remember my first day as a network journalist and I went out in the car with a cameraman who asked me for a blow job.

What?

He was joking—it was a joke—but it was also a test of my character really.

What if you’d said yes?

Well, I think he probably would have run a mile to be honest. I think it was a test to see how far he could go. I responded with a simple fuck off and that seemed to be enough to pass the test.

Good on you for responding in that way!

I think the problem there is that for women who didn’t respond as I did—and who got upset and offended—it made it very difficult to work with him.

Right, so it was a test then of your supposed sense of humour.

It was certainly an interesting initiation.

I haven’t had anything that overt, but there have been real power imbalances with some bosses where they say reasonably sexual stuff and when I was younger I didn’t feel that I could complain.

That could be because you do tend to internalise it as a joke. There’s so much banter and jocularity in newsrooms that it’s easily to internalise it as that and you also think to yourself: If I complain about that will they then think I have no sense of humour? That I’m uptight.

That’s right, or difficult.

But having said that, there are times when inappropriate humour can lighten situations and I wonder of some of that is being lost.

Like the poor guy who didn’t know whether he was allowed to compliment me on my boots! I felt sorry for him and said, “yes you are allowed to, and thank you!” But it is true that in this profession you do need a little bit of dark humour from time to time because we are dealing with incredibly stressful and awkward situations and some of those gallows humour moments can help. It’s okay if you know someone well enough, but it’s not appropriate if it’s your first day on the job.

I guess it can be contextual and that’s important to remember sometimes. Now, that leads into the Me Too thing and you have a part to play with this—you’re actually consulted on your organisations work that it’s doing regarding this?

I’m not doing the hands-on work.

Is it something that needs to be done?

Judging by the over 400 emails we’ve received—absolutely it is. One of the criticisms when we
launched the Me Too campaign, was that we should leave it to the police and leave it to the official processes, well these women have tried those avenues and they didn't work. So yes, there's absolutely a need for it and some of the stories that have come to light and many more will come to light, and it shows that there is a systemic sexual harassment issues in New Zealand workplaces and they need to be fixed.

Is there a conflict there though? That this is advocacy rather than investigation?

Well, no because it's got the same journalistic rigour applied to this investigation as we have to with any other investigation, in fact, in a way possibly more rigour. From a legal perspective—there are lawyers crawling all over all of these stories and so I don't feel it's advocacy journalism. I mean, we're forever giving a voice to those who don't have a voice, and this is another example of that.

In terms of context being important and times being different, do you have to keep that in mind when you assess these stories? For example, if we're talking about something that occurred 40 years ago—and was not necessarily frowned upon at that time—does that make a difference?

Most of the situations are contemporary. We're dealing with incidents that are on a much more serious level than things that may have been acceptable then and are not so much now. Some of the public criticism we had over this when we started was of this nature, we were criticised for pursuing bum-pinchers. Well really? No, that's not news. These are serious cases of sexual harassment and assault.

That is one of those things that we don't talk about—systematic harassment. Particularly in the lower wage economies. The more we can shine a light on these things, the better.

The company I work for example, the CEO is a woman and the senior executive team is fifty percent women and I think you can tell there's a female influence when for instance the recent parental leave policy was released—it was so impressive, and I wished that I'd had something like that when I had my children.

Has that been hard for you to juggle motherhood with your career? It's a trite question, I know, but the difficulties are real.

Yeah, they are and yet so many parents do it. It has been bloody hard sometimes and actually it does have an impact on the choices you make. So, I've stayed in companies where I've been fortunate to have bosses who understand the difficulties and who afford me some flexibility in hours.

And that's a key thing. That flexibility will keep people in jobs that may not be perfect but if you have flexibility you're more likely to stay there—and again, that means you are more constrained as a woman with a family than say if you're a man who isn't predominantly responsible for childcare.

It does force you to make decisions about your career and put your own ambition on hold to some extent when you are the one who is doing most of the caregiving. And actually, we don't even tend to have conversations about that.

No, it's implied. So where next for you? What would you most like to do? What do you see as your personal pinnacle?

I'm loving my job more than ever and we've just got finding to do five in-depth investigations next year and I'm at once excited and terrified by that because what an incredible opportunity but shit they need to be really good.

Because they are the first of their type?

Yes, under this funding model. But it's good because it makes you feel vital and I'm really excited about it. There are so many stories.

Still.

Still. I have a list that's so long that I can't get near anywhere near all of them. While I still feel that way, I'm not going anywhere.

What advice would you give young people coming into the industry?

I'm surrounded by impressive young journalists of both genders and I don't really feel that they need any advice. More is required of them now and they seem to be able to handle it, so I'm loathe to dish our advice.

What about in terms of qualifications. When we came into the industry a degree wasn't necessary—there was much more of a feeling that if you were any good you'd probably get a job. I don't know if that's the case anymore.

I think that is a mistake.

It's a mistake to go down the road of insisting on a qualification you mean?

Yes absolutely. You don't need a three-year degree in order to be a journalist.

No, but that's what's required these days.

I know. But it's a fundamental error on the industry's part. When you look at some of the best journalists that I know, they don't have journalism qualifications. People's work should speak for itself. When I did my journalism certificate—it was 6 months long and I learnt more in the two weeks I spent at Radio Nelson under an incredible chief reporter than I did the entire course. I'm not saying don't educate yourself, but I do think it's short-sighted of the industry to insist on a qualification.
Old Dreams and New Realities
Susan Henderson

Susan Henderson is an American writer who has written two novels—Up From the Blue and The Flicker of Old Dreams.
She spoke to Zara Potts about her latest novel and why she had to step out of her comfort zone of New York and travel to live in a small town so that she could truly understand the thoughts and realities of the town and the people she would be writing about.

In The Flicker Of Old Dreams—you deal with some very heavy themes—the American Dream, the death of the small town, outsiders, family dynamics—they’re all there! You obviously like to write about the big things in life?
I do! I try and write about really big things but in really intimate terms. In this book, I’m pitting people who fear change against people who are desperate for it. But I try to put that universal conflict into an intimate setting.

Which is what you’ve done with your book—you’ve taken big issues and set them in a small town.
A very small town!

It’s set in a town called Petroleum—that’s a great name, by the way—but you actually spent a month in a similar town when you were writing the book. What was that like for you, I think I read somewhere that you actually found it quite frightening?
Yeah! It was scary to have so few people around and to feel so small in all that wide open space.

It’s interesting that you set the book in a small town because it reflects the polarisation that is occurring in society now. From an outsider’s point of view, when you look at America—it’s always been polarised, but I don’t know that it’s ever been so polarised—apart from the Civil War years I guess—but did you feel the polarisation when you were there? Were the thoughts and concerns of the people in this small town quite different to your friends in New York?
It was unbelievably different. For a start, there was no diversity. In fact, it took me a long time to get comfortable writing about a place with no diversity. So many of the ways I spend my time and so many of the things that make me rise up and protest were non-issues, or even offensive, to some in this town. You realize how many issues don’t translate from big city to small, rural town. Part of the great thing about America is that it is so diverse. But that also makes things complicated when we try to come up with rules that work for everybody, even as we live in such different communities and different landscapes.

Did it give you more of an appreciation as to why that difference is there? I know for myself in my own bubble, I don’t necessarily appreciate other people’s experience—so did actually being in a town like this give you a better understanding of their concerns?
Whenever you take time to know people, it’s harder to make blanket statements about them. The people I met in this town were so self-sufficient, so hardworking for little reward. And even though many of their houses were falling apart, damn it, they were proud, and they were having parades.

I think it’s the same principle that we saw in the UK with Brexit. The big city people voted quite a different way to the people from small towns or the towns that are really suffering. Those were the towns that have had to deal with the consequences of political decision making that perhaps many people in the big cities have not. You can understand the divide—but it’s hard to understand each other’s concerns.

It helped me to see a lot of my own prejudices. I realised how much I associate ‘smart’ with being academically smart. But when I was there, I saw how smart they were in other ways—fixing cars and machinery, taking care of livestock, knowing so much about the cycles of crops and the cycles of raising cattle.

I don’t think we appreciate that enough. I think that as academics or intellectuals we do tend to look down on knowledge that isn’t acquired from books.
When I was there I didn’t change my strongly held beliefs about civil rights and things like that,
but I did take a hard look at myself in terms of ‘Am I looking down at people? Am I talking down to people? Am I discounting their feelings and opinions because they’re different from mine?’ And so, it did shake up my own perceptions and it humbled me.

You did get quite a culture shock though—I believe your hair actually fell out?
It did! In handfuls! I kind of wonder if there was something in the water, but it could have been stress. I was really worried that it wouldn’t grow back.

But you were also dealing with some personal grief while you were writing this, so it may have been that too.

There was the stress of being out of my element. I felt a lack of confidence the whole time I was there. I felt intrusive in my role there. They were like sweating and they had dirt on their hands and I’m just there with a pen and a camera. Sometimes I would take pictures of the homes and I remember thinking “I can’t wait to show this crooked house to my friends back home” and then I’d realise that I was kind of being an asshole. It was definitely a learning process and I felt like there was a lot more room to connect with people and I think it made me realise that a lot of the time we’re not really trying.

The idea of working hands—hands with dirt on them—it reminds me of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia when all the intellectuals who had no callouses on their hands were sent off for re-education… if you wore glasses and had smooth hands you were in the firing line.

Yeah, we would be sent off immediately!

Now the book is very personal to you, isn’t it—can you tell me why?

Well, much of the story revolves around the character of Mary, who is really awkward socially. She worries about being judged. She worries that the things she’s interested in are boring to other people. She’s someone who has not allowed herself to speak up on her own behalf. So, Mary is caught between these people who have raised her and been her community, for good and bad, and she’s having to learn to reconnect with her own wants and desires and beliefs. So, for me the book is playing with politics—where is the middle, where can we still care about each other and yet not have to abandon our ideals?

I’ve seen so many instances of this exact thing, where families are trying to find that middle ground. How do you have Christmas, how do you have Thanksgiving when half of your family believes in something you find abhorrent? The political becomes personal… You can’t separate them anymore. We are struggling through this.

It’s interesting to watch from here in NZ—it’s strange to watch the divide happening. When I was in America in 2012, I was surprised back then when I would talk to people and they would say flat out: “I can’t be friends with a Republican” and I was like “What? Just put the differences aside”. It seemed so extreme to me. But it’s got even more extreme now.

I grew up in D.C. and my father was in the military and worked under four administrations, of different parties. Back then, my neighbours were just my neighbours. I knew some were Republicans and some were Democrats but, for the most part, it was just the guy we borrowed tomatoes from, or the guy mowing his lawn whose wife had cancer. I feel we’ve gotten to a point where families are trying to find that middle ground. It seemed so extreme to me. But it’s got even more extreme now.

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Yeah, we would be sent off immediately!

As human beings we are all afraid of death—it’s the great unknown—did all that research make the thought of death more palatable for you?
It definitely broke through a number of taboos I had. I became comfortable talking about death. I didn’t have to say things like ‘passed on’. There’s what we think of grief—the loss and the tenderness and sadness—and then, when you imagine running a funeral home—there’s the reality of the dead body, the awkwardness of how to carry it out of a room and around corners. It’s not always a graceful act, you know? So I really got to explore the physicality of death and the certainty of rot.

There are a lot of metaphors in it around death and grief. The dying town, the death of traditional jobs—but you actually went one further with this and made the main character a mortician…

Yes, I did!

The idea of death and grief obviously informs your work, why is that?
I didn’t know I was going to be writing about a funeral home or a mortician, but I had been in the town only a short while when I realised, “Okay, I’m watching something in the process of dying.”

The idea of a mortician came about simply because I thought ‘Who is the best person to tell a story about death? Who could tell it without defensiveness and without euphemisms?’ Once I decided to make an embalmer my narrator, the writing became fun because I was working with death on many levels and that made the book gel together.

It’s interesting how customs around death have changed. I like the piece where you talk about the 19th century practice of photography where grieving people would photograph themselves next to the dead loved one—was this a common practice?
It was back then, yes. One day, doing research, I fell down the rabbit hole of post-mortem photography. I got so attached to the contradictions in those photos—how they were both morbid and touching. I mean, really heart-breaking. I love things that don’t fit so well or that are seemingly contradictory. So I thought, “I’m just going to put a photo like that in the book somewhere.” The book isn’t set in the past but I thought, “I’m just going to do it because this is the way this Mom is going to express her grief.”

What a rabbit hole. In terms of your research, you must have done a lot of research for this book and I imagine it would have taken you to some quite strange places…
I love research more than I love writing. After about a year of learning how to be a mortician and learning how a grain elevator works and diagramming it out and listening to YouTube videos to hear what it sounds like when it’s running—at some point, I thought, “I should start writing.”

But yes, there was so much research and I had a book I special-ordered from a library in another state that was an encyclopedia of dead things. So if you want to know things like what a liver looks like after one day of rot or three days of rot, it shows you. I know so much about these things now.

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We all have stories of people who we love dying—and it’s strange because the actual death seems to be something we want to know about as mourners. My uncle died this year and the specifics became important to us for some reason. How did he die? When did he die? Knowing the specifics seems to have some impact on the grief process.

I think the details can be comforting. My uncle died this year too. He was in his seventies and ice climbing. He fell quite a ways, and the specifics became important to the family—the fact that all of his ribs had broken. We talked to the other climbers who were there and needed to know what they saw and did when they found him, as well as what the day had been like before the accident—what they’d eaten, what they’d laughed about. The details helped to make it real and helped us grieve. It helped us to know that it was a good thing he didn’t survive the fall. And that his last day—except for dying—had been pretty great.

You realise, in the funeral home business, that the physicality of death is so much of the focus. Even the difficulty of doing burials in winter—whether you can dig into frozen ground. It made me way more comfortable with it all.

And a funny thing happened when I went on book tour. It began as expected—I’d do a reading from the book and take questions afterward. But pretty soon I started doing events with a friend of mine, Amy Wallen, who had written a memoir focused on death, and found that the audiences just wanted to talk about death. So we stopped talking about our books entirely and we ended up saying, “Oh we wrote these books, but let’s talk about death.” It was fascinating to hear all the different traditions and the different fears.

It’s a great fascination isn’t it. Even though a lot of people don’t like to talk about it and pretend it doesn’t exist, we are drawn to it.

I think that’s the fascination—it’s the thing that is going to happen to everyone. But it’s also that we get so weird and vague whenever we try to talk about it.

Those phrases like ‘passed over’ people don’t like saying, ‘they died.’

It’s interesting because I found that the people who grieved in the healthiest ways in these groups were the ones who washed the bodies. It’s a common Muslim tradition and, in some cases, simply a family tradition. When these people talked about bathing their mothers or sisters after they had died, the stories were so very gentle and healing. It takes time to wash a body and a long moment to say goodbye in a very physical way.

I suppose there’s also a kind of communion that happens.

You can be so tender and loving when you wash a body. A lot of what I talk about in the book, through Mary, is that we all have these imperfect bodies that are broken in ways, and there are all these anxieties we have about our bodies. The person sponging and rinsing that body sees the whole, real body that’s often hidden until death.

I guess in a way it’s a map. You’ve got your scars and your belly that you got when you had children, it’s a map of your living experience.

Yes, exactly.

Another big theme of your book is centred around familial relationships—particularly the father-daughter relationship here. Does the idea of parental change interest you—particularly the idea that parents need to adapt to their children not being children anymore?

I feel like everything in the world can be expressed by looking at a family. How complicated it is to love people unconditionally. How difficult it is to stay connected to another person as they change. I loved playing with the awkwardness of parent-to-child and child-to-parent relationships, where they clearly love each other but they don’t really know how to be with each other. Mary and her father have a good working relationship but they don’t know how to be together when they’re not working. I like to go right to the heartbreak.

The parent child dynamic is so complicated. Even when you’re trying to be an adult, it’s hard. I know even with my mother when she tells me to do something I immediately revert to being a teenager.

Right. In my book, it’s centred on this father and daughter who are trying to have a grown-up friendship, but he really only knows how to play the Dad role. He worries that she’s come out weird and she’s angry that he sees her that way. So there’s this tension—he believes he loves her unconditionally and yet he’s sending the signal, ‘How can I help you be different than you are?’ I’m just playing with that space where we fumble around as parents and as children.

When you finished this book, it sounds like a very personal process. Did you feel at the end that the process had changed you at all?

I think so. I felt like our country was in a near-constant state of rage and I didn’t want to be a part of that rage anymore. I didn’t want to be so reactive. So, I felt like writing this book reminded me to listen more and to not react in haste. It’s good to just slow down sometimes and let the reaction with your neighbour, despite the offensive bumper stickers on his car, just be about borrowing tomatoes from his garden again or asking how his wife’s chemo is going. There’s a lot about people we can still be present with. It doesn’t mean set aside things we need to fight for, but we can try harder not to hate individuals as we do it.

They sound like really good guidelines for Twitter.

It’s a sad state of the world when you’re just trying not to hate people. On Twitter, you can reach that emotion in one second, and then you can send it back out into the Twitter world just as quickly.

As a writer who does so much research and puts so much thought into your words, does it irritate you where everyone on social can say what they like, uninformed or incoherent, and that all opinions have become equal?

I think it worries me as a human being more than as a writer. Think about the people you love dearly. And then, only a subset of those people know everything about you and still love you. Really, only those people (and there’s maybe only one or two of them) should be privy to our totally random, second-to-second thoughts. On Twitter we’re typing our knee-jerk reactions for everyone to see, and it really erodes our relationships. Say you post that you’re excited you’ve just won tickets to a Justin Bieber concert. And, right away, I respond to you by saying I don’t like Justin Bieber. That’s the kind of thing that happens online now.
But it’s crossing over. Only a few years ago people would say “Oh, you’d never say that to someone in real life, you’d only say that on Twitter,” and now actually people have made the leap and are saying mean things in person.

Yeah, the rudeness and brashness has really spilled over into real life. In general, I just think ‘don’t be a dick.’

That’s a great adage to live by; don’t be a dick.

We should be striving for that low bar right now.

Sometimes a thought is best left unsaid. But finally, I want to ask you what your reaction to the me-too movement has been—I know you were a sexual abuse counsellor.

I was worried when the me-too movement first happened because, when I was a counsellor, I witnessed how much harm could come to those who spoke out about their abusers, especially in court. Suddenly the woman was attacked for why she’d gone to a particular party or worn a particular dress, and her character was judged in so many ways. I never discouraged my clients from telling their stories, but I did let them know what they could expect if they went to court so it wasn’t a surprise and so we could build the necessary support network. So, at first, I was very cynical about the me-too movement as I saw friends of mine telling their stories publicly. I thought, ‘Oh, this is going to go badly because I’ve seen what happens to women who speak up.’

Then a friend of mine spoke up against a man who had abused her, and the guy got fired. I had never seen that happen before, where a woman makes herself publicly vulnerable in that way and it turns into something powerful. I was so stunned because I had seen woman after woman basically be told that she caused it and she brought it on herself. I’d seen women lose their friends and their jobs when they spoke up, while their abusers kept their jobs. It’s been encouraging to watch this shift in power. For me, it has been a big lesson—just keep telling your truth, even when it’s unpopular, and at some point, the dam breaks. There are a lot of women who have paid a heavy price for speaking up and I feel like we need to honour those who had the same courage but didn’t get the same results.

It’s sobering to remember that the wins have only been recent—and the other caution is around whether this will become a trend and not just a phase. We mustn’t be complacent about the rights we have. We still need to be aware of what we need to fight for. We’ve come so far but we’ve still got a long way to go.

I feel like we keep learning the same lessons. I still think we need to remember the simple things like listen more, be kind to people, try to find something good in the person you’re talking to, don’t be a dick.

And don’t show your dick to a woman. Unless she asks.

Right! Don’t be a dick will be my slogan to live by.