



IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN AND A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

Like many women who have reached a “certain age”, author Lyn Byrski says she is not interested in easing up, writes **KAREN HARDY**.

It's hard to believe Liz Byrski is 70. There's an effervescence to her; her voice light and full of laughter, she's busy writing and teaching and travelling and catching up with family and friends. And it kind of irks her that society thinks it's unusual that women of a “certain age” can still lead such a life, that they seek adventure or even romance.

“All around me are these women living extraordinary lives,” says Byrski. “They're starting businesses, travelling, learning to fly or surf or something they'd never done before. They're an integral part of families or wanting another romance or going back to study. All this is happening but popular culture doesn't reflect that.”

She found when she turned 50, after raising two children mostly on her own, and having more time to read, that books in particular weren't reflecting real life, her life.

“I grew up with books written in England during the war and post-war years and a lot of them were about mature women adjusting to life during the war, after the war, and I kept thinking, where are the books like that? The books that talk about families, or caring for relatives, being discontent with life when you're in that post-menopausal state ...

“Having been a freelance writer all my life I took on that old saying if you can't find what you want to read you have to sit down and write it, and that's what I did.”

Family Secrets, her eighth novel, is a tightly written book about forgiveness and possibility. Patriarch Gerald has died and his long-suffering wife Connie and adult children Andrew and Kerry feel a sense of relief. They're all dealing with their own situations, determined to make the most of what's to come, but at the same time reeling at how fractured their family has become.

Byrski has cornered something of a niche market writing about the lives of older women. “I remember telling some colleagues I was going to give it a go

and they said who would read books about older women,” she says.

“I laughed and thought, ‘Older women, who read more books than most people’. My readers would love to have more stories about older women but no one is writing them.”

She believes part of it has to do with the stigma of ageing.

“I think if you approach ageing with enthusiasm, and grab all the opportunities ageing offers you, you'll have a much better time of it.”

Byrski embraced turning 70 earlier this year, saying she had the best party ever, with family, friends and colleagues.

“I've always wanted to be old,” she laughs. “I thought it would be exciting to be old. I had quite an isolated childhood in the English countryside and I was an only child and I grew up surrounded by older people and I thought they had a wonderful life. They were allowed to do all the things I couldn't do and I envied them in a way.”

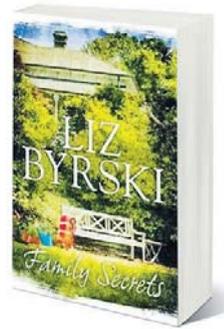
She says she's become a better writer as she's aged, drawing on life experience, better able to express the emotions and the issues.

“I really struggled with the first novel for two years, trying to make that transition from non-fiction and journalism to fiction. It was very difficult. I finished the first novel and sent it off and a number of publishers turned it down and never said why.

“I realised that I'd brought a lot of my own feminist, socialist politics into it and that voice was really interfering with the story. So I rewrote it and I was pretty sure it worked when the publisher read it again and offered me a two-book contract.”

Not that Byrski, who has always been an advocate for women's rights, has let the politics go.

“I think I've just worked out more subtle ways of slipping it in. Quite often I'll get an email from a reader saying I'm not a feminist and I've been reading your novels for a while and I think they might be feminist books. And they're right.”



FAMILY SECRETS
Liz Byrski
MacMillan,
\$29.99



Sunday Age, Melbourne
29 Jun 2014, by Karen Hardy

Melbourne Magazine, page 16 - 527.00 cm²
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BRIEF PANMAC-MEN

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Niche market: "My readers would love to have more stories about older women but no one is writing them," says Liz Byrski.