

# Smelling the coffee

As much as she loved her native Scotland, Alison Whitlock ran away to Australia to escape the legacy of her abusive father. There she joined a writing group, found her voice and produced a hilarious, no-misery memoir which is winning critical acclaim. Laughter really is the best medicine, as Emma Cowing discovers

"Life here in Australia is free and easy really. I came this far away to get away from that whole Scottish thing and now I feel good. I'm a lot more the person that I want to be. But I came back to Scotland last year for a visit and I loved it so much that I can't be settled here in Sydney any more"

**O**NE sunny day not that long ago, more than a decade after Alison Whitlock had left behind her horrific childhood in the Scottish town of Blantyre for a new life in Sydney, she took her visiting mother out for a cup of coffee. Her mother had recently made tentative steps to walk away from the past too, and had not long left Alison's abusive father. "We went into this café and when the waitress came to take our order, mum couldn't ask for a cup of coffee," Whitlock tells me down the phone from Australia. "I said to her, 'what do you want?' and she said, 'oh, I don't know, anything'. It was really sad, it was such a small thing, but even when it came to a cup of coffee, she felt she couldn't have the things she wanted because [the years spent with] my father had robbed her of her voice and her self-confidence. A week or two later, we went in again and I asked her what she would like: she said 'I'll have a coffee latte'. I couldn't believe it: I thought 'Wow! Something's changed!'"

That both women had had to travel more than 10,000 miles from Scotland to each rediscover their own identity says much about the existence that both were once so desperate to escape.

"Moving this far away from where you're brought up, you get to become the person that you'd like to be," Whitlock says. "Whereas to have still been in Scotland and in close proximity to family stuff, it would have been difficult to break away from the mould of who people think you are. You come away to a place where nobody knows you, you can be whoever you like."

Whitlock, a pretty 44-year-old who nowadays runs a café in Sydney, where she lives with her French husband and their two cats, has written a book about all that 'family stuff'. In *Poking Seaweed With a Stick and Running Away From the Smell* (more on that title later) she tells a tale of growing up in the Scotland of the 1960s and '70s. That life began in a small

cottage in Back O Hill, near Cambuslang, and later in Blantyre where she, her two siblings and her mother attempted to live normal lives in the shadow of a husband and father who was a workaholic and alcoholic, as well as abusive. He sent his children out to do his milk round when they were aged just three and five, constantly swore and shouted at them, and was often drunk. By the time she was eight, Whitlock says she was fantasising about shooting him with a sawn-off shotgun, so unbearable was her home life.

But *Poking Seaweed With a Stick and Running Away From the Smell* is not, she insists, a misery memoir devised to invoke pity for the author and her family. In fact, she says, she hopes "people will find it funny". And - somewhat surprisingly for such a grim story - it is. Very funny.

Whether she is relating an excruciating trip to a Brownie camp where her mother made her use a crocus pot as a breakfast bowl, or the time her mother tried to get rid of their father, first by lacing his meals with out-of-date painkillers and then by feeding him calorific, cholesterol-laden food (a trip to the doctor's after several months of this treatment confirmed that he was in the roughest health of his life and his cholesterol levels had never been lower), Whitlock manages to inject humour into even the most surreal and tragic aspects of Whitlock family life.

But while much of the story is endearingly told from a child's perspective, with chapters entitled *Christmas Day was always the worst*, and *The day my da took our ponies to the glue factory*, the dark shadow cast by her father looms large. She unflinchingly relates the night her father stripped naked in front of visitors and started swearing at them, and the awful abuse he inflicted upon their mother, who - apart from one aborted attempt at leaving him early on - stuck with him until well after Alison, her brother Andrew and sister Izzy had grown up

and left home. "She didn't think she had a choice," says Whitlock of her mother. "She had three children and nowhere to go. Nowadays, for women in an abusive relationship there are women's refuges and recognition that domestic violence is not OK, but back then there wasn't. Mum had been to the police on several occasions and they'd just send her back home to her man, because it wasn't their business. It was the business of families behind closed doors."

The book, a poignant mix of sadness and humour, has become a surprise hit in Australia, where it was published last year to critical acclaim. Did its Scottishness (there are many descriptions of wet mornings, milk rounds and bare 'horses' in its pages) translate well for a sun-kissed readership in the southern hemisphere?

"Yes," she says, sounding pretty surprised herself. "People seem to relate to it. I haven't had any problems with the cultural differences at all." Although, she adds dryly, "everyone out here loves all things Scottish, of course. It doesn't matter what it is, as long as it's Scottish."

The most disturbing part of the book relates an incident where the young Whitlock accompanied her father to a 'business meeting' in a car park, with an old family friend. There was an issue over money and the friend suddenly produced a hammer with which he started attacking her father. At one point Whitlock got in the way and was almost hit with the hammer herself. Yet despite all her feelings of anger towards her father, she torments herself, even to this day, for not having done more to protect him - even going so far as to say that she should have taken the blows herself. Why on Earth, after all he had put her and the family through, did she feel guilty for not protecting him?

"I don't know," she confesses. "It has to be something to do with the father/daughter connection; something that's just there above all else. I just felt wholly responsible that night because I didn't do enough to protect him. I felt guilty, because I stepped away from this hammer that was being wielded."

The book only came into being because Whitlock, searching for something more meaningful to do with her evenings than watch the telly, started nosing about for an evening class at her local college.

"I finally stumbled on a creative writing course and started writing, and it was just the most amazing thing I had ever experienced. All this stuff came out about my



past and, eventually, someone suggested I put it together and try to get it published. I certainly didn't sit down and think 'I must write a book about how terrible my life was.'"

The title, *Poking Seaweed With a Stick and Running Away From the Smell*, is meant to evoke the stirring up of painful memories and the bad feelings they provoke. Provocative, you may think, but this is a book whose working title was *Oh No, My Da's No Got Cancer* (a chapter bearing this title still remains).

Her parents, neither of whom she names in the book, referring to them only as Ma and Da, are both still alive. I wonder what her father feels about her describing their lives in such intimate detail?

"He hasn't read it," she says. "He phoned me one night - we speak about twice a year on the phone - and I told him I was writing a book. He said: 'Oh what's that about?' Is it about what a prick I've been? He's never said another word about it."

"At one point I wondered about sending him a copy, but I thought, I can't have him throw my book away, and that's what he'd do. It would be like the ultimate dismissal to know I sent him the book and it was still sitting there, unopened. It's too precious to me to have it discarded."

Her mother, on the other hand, could not be more delighted. Aged 67, she has, since ordering that milestone cup of coffee latte in a Sydney cafeteria, wholeheartedly embraced her freedom: she has dyed her hair purple, got a nose ring, been backpacking and even snagged herself a new boyfriend - another Scottish emigré in Australia.

And what of Whitlock herself? Is she settled in Sydney now? She's not sure.

"Life in Australia is free and easy, really. I came this far to get away from that whole Scottish thing and now I feel good. I'm a lot more like the person I want to be. But I went back to Scotland last year for a visit and I loved it so much that I can't be settled here in Sydney any more."

She laughs at the thought. "I crave Scotland. I crave the landscape. Every day I think about miserable weather and freezing mornings. I really miss it."

● *Poking Seaweed With a Stick and Running Away From the Smell* is out now, published by Polygon, £8.99



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### YOU HAVE TO LAUGH...MAKING COMEDY OUT OF TRAGEDY

#### WAR SITCOMS

'Allo 'Allo, *Blackadder*, *M\*A\*S\*H\**, *Dad's Army* and *Hogan's Heroes*: all very different sitcoms whose hearts shared one central theme - the tragedy of war. Whether it was 'Allo 'Allo's supposedly sinister Second World War Gestapo officers, *Blackadder's* First World War character feigning madness to escape the trenches, the incompetence of Captain Mainwaring's British home guard, or *Hogan's Heroes* American POWs outwitting their German captors, these TV series attempted to sprinkle the 20th century's great conflicts with the all-purpose balm of humour, with memorable success.



#### DARING INDIVIDUALS

Charlie Chaplin's on-screen character interweaved some of the worst elements of the Depression and his own insecurities about life into a unique brand of humour, while Woody Allen has never shied away from using his personal traumas, either from his childhood or his romantic relationships, as material for his comedy movies. American actor Evan Händler, best known as Harry in *Sex and the City*, first came to fame when he wrote a book entitled *Time On Fire: My Comedy of Terrors*, a humorous account of his battle with leukaemia, which he later performed on stage as a one-man play.



#### TRAGICOMEDIES

Pioneered by the Greeks, the tragicomic play - where dreadful things happen, yet everyone has a good giggle along the way - has long been a favoured vehicle for playwrights. Popular during the Renaissance with writers such as Giovanni Battista Guarini and Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare also dabbled in the genre with plays such as *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, while even his most tragic works, such as *Hamlet*, contained elements of dark humour. In more modern times Samuel Beckett (particularly in *Waiting For Godot*) is one of the finest examples of a tragicomic playwright, along with other 20th-century greats such as Alan Ayckbourn, Tom Stoppard and the late Harold Pinter.