



Di Morrissey & Gabrielle Morrissey

“WE COME FROM A STRONG LINE OF WOMEN”

Best-selling author Di Morrissey pursued a fiction-writing career after motherhood, at great cost. Here Di and her daughter, sexologist Dr Gabrielle Morrissey, reflect on their unconventional history and a mutual drive to succeed.

62 www.notebookmagazine.com

Di: “I was desperate to have children and I was quite young, 25, when I became pregnant with Gabrielle. She was my first baby and I was living in Hawaii with my husband Peter. I did Lamaze classes in natural childbirth and it was a perfect birth, and I had a perfect baby girl.

“Peter was American and we were based in Hawaii while I waited for my US citizenship, so I had no family or support – my mum was in Australia and my mother-in-law was in San Francisco. I was in hospital for 24 hours, then when I arrived home, Peter soon went back to school and I was left with this bundle.

“I just struggled on; I was lucky she was a good baby. I’d take her to the beach, so she was always in the water. It was an idyllic place, a wonderful time, and I had nothing to do but focus on Gabrielle. It was the first time I’d not worked since I was 15, but I knew at some point we’d be going overseas and I’d have obligations, and I wanted to write a book.

“Peter was working for the US State Department and when I became pregnant with Nick a year and a half later, we were on our way to Iran. Then the plan changed and we moved to Washington. When we arrived we had rented furniture, no baby things and knew nobody.

“Eighteen months later we moved to Guyana and were living in Somerset Maugham-style mansions with servants. I’d gone from a tiny flat in London, where I worked as a women’s editor on Fleet Street, to becoming part of the diplomatic community with a cook and driver. And, because we had the luxury of live-in staff, I could work a few days a week in radio, TV or journalism and leave the children at home. It gave me great freedom.

“Because we travelled so much, Gabrielle was sometimes the only white child in her class. It made her incredibly broad-minded and compassionate. She had an imaginary friend called Chicky and taught herself to count by watching ‘Sesame Street’. She learned quickly and her books became treasures.

“I tried to start writing a book, but it just didn’t work. That kind of life is like living in a goldfish bowl; many diplomatic marriages break up because of it. I felt as though I’d been an adjunct to Peter’s career and that I’d put my career on hold.

"It wasn't until I went on holiday to London, where I met author Tom Keneally, that I sat down in a crowded house and just started writing. It wasn't a conscious decision to leave my children, but I would have been bitter and twisted if I hadn't, whining: 'I could have written a book.'

"I had this internal volcano. Since the age of seven I was aiming to write books, so I decided to give up an awful lot to pursue a wild dream. Gabrielle was 10 when I came home to Australia while she stayed with her dad. It didn't seem right to uproot them – it was hard on me, but better for them. I moved in with my mum and worked on 'Good Morning Australia'.

"There was no hand-wringing from my mum – we come from a strong line of women who just get on with things. She said, 'If you think it's the right thing to do, you must do it.' Gabrielle and Nick would come and stay with me for three months of every year. There was a lot of to-and-fro-ing and of course I was lonely; I missed

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them and threw myself into a demanding job. After eight years I realised I still hadn't written a book; the next week I'd left work.

"When she was in her early twenties, Gabrielle came to stay with me. I took her to the Kimberley, where I was researching a book, and spent time with Aboriginal elders – we did all of these bonding rituals and it made us both re-evaluate what's important. It was an extraordinary time.

"I think Gabrielle is proud of me as she's seen me start from nothing. I've had no grants, I've struggled in a male-chauvinist world. I've fought for every book to be the best it can be and watched each one sell more than the last. People think it came easy, but it came at great cost.

"Despite Gabrielle's massive career achievements, ever since she was a teenager all she wanted to be, ultimately, was a mother. So Sonoma [Gabrielle's first child] has brought her, and me, such joy. The biggest compliment Gabrielle has ever given me was when she said, 'I hope I can be as good a mother to Sonoma as you have been to me.'"

Gabrielle: "My earliest memories of my mum are of her reading me bedtime stories. They seemed to come off the top of her head, but she always knew where she'd finished the night before and would always ask me questions and build my opinions into the story. That went on for years. We were living in Singapore and Indonesia at the time, so I remember the heat, and my mum being a glamorous, colourful and dynamic woman.

"My parents split up when I was seven, but I spent some time apart from Mum when I was six, when she went to London. At the time, it didn't have a dramatic effect – my parents protected us through the transition – but I remember being sad and wishing they'd get back together. We were told they didn't love each other anymore, but that they still loved us. They handled it in the best way they could, and I never thought it was my fault.

"However, it impacted on me in other ways. I took a good long time before

I married, as I knew my mother had needed another life and a career and I didn't want to do that to my children. I also feel strongly that I never want to split up with my husband. No matter how well it's handled, divorce is still a split and it does have an impact on children.

"Mum was the best role model I could have had. She was independent and hard working – there were no glass ceilings to her. She set out to fulfil her dreams and achieved them. I learned a lesson from her that you can do anything you want to do. So I've never got a job through the regular channels – applications, interviews – I've seized opportunities and made them happen. That's classic Di Morrissey. And if she'd had a smaller life, I would never have had that drive. I wouldn't go back and re-write my history. I've emerged just fine, and with a great mother.

"The time I missed her most was when I was going through puberty in Islamabad, Pakistan. I was living in an entirely male household and, just as I was starting to become a woman, I was told I had to cover



Gabrielle and Di play dress-ups in Victorian wear at Palm Beach in 1981.

up. I didn't wear a burqa but I did have to wear long-sleeved tops and pants to my ankles and wrists. It immediately made me feel different to my brother.

"I did get to spend big chunks of time with Mum, and it was all about shopping, clothes and make-up; all the things I had no access to back then in Asia. In my twenties I decided to move back to Australia. Mum and I were living at opposite ends of the country and I was forging my own life, but we spoke every day. Then at the end of 2004, I moved to northern New South Wales to teach and it was nice to be near Mum and my grandmother. We walked our dogs on the beach and had dinner together.

"When I became pregnant, I was living in Canada, which paved the way for me to come back. My mother had children when she was far away from her family and I didn't want that. Mum threw me a baby shower and was with me the day I went into hospital, and came back again when the baby was six hours old. It was what I wanted and I'm elated that's what I got.

"Now she's a grandmother, she's known as Gigi. She didn't want an 'old lady on a rocking chair' name, so we came up with something different. It stands for 'gorgeous, glamorous, generous, gregarious grandmother'. It also represents double G: Sonoma's middle name is Grace, and it's also Mum's real first name. That's how it all came together." ■
As told to Joanna Bounds.