

Italian love affair

Kiwi author Nicky Pellegrino draws on her colourful Italian family background for her latest novel

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LONGTIME JOURNALIST Nicky Pellegrino is used to asking, not answering, the questions. But as the magazine editor-turned-author adds more books, sales and glowing reviews to her resumé, she's growing accustomed to being on the other side of the interview. Gradually, that is.

"It's really weird actually, because you're so used to making other people talk about themselves that you keep thinking, 'What's the angle? What are they going to ask now?'" From marriage to media, childhood to commuting, former *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* editor Nicky doesn't skirt the topic but comes straight to the point, frequently poking fun at herself in an English accent with just a hint of Kiwi twang.

While a dry sense of humour and warmth emanate from Nicky, the first thing to strike me is her height: at 6'1", she towers over other women even while sitting down. And while I expected the long, dark locks I'd seen in her byline snapshot (she's still the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* beauty editor as well as the *Herald on Sunday* books editor), this isn't the kind of done-up-to-the-hilt beauty disciple who makes you want to hide your chipped nails. Natural curls frame faint freckles and brown eyes which flash when she quips that she's considering lying about her age. "I'm 44 but I think surely I'm not that old! I still feel 34."

After just three years of writing full time, she's already a best-selling author – and not just at home. Picked up by UK publishers Orion, her popular-fiction

novels have been translated into eight languages and snapped up by readers in countries as far-flung as Lithuania. A deft mixture of foodie pleasure and romance sprinkled with intrigue, they're light literary desserts delicious enough to devour in one sitting; think Maeve Binchy crossed with Joanne Harris.

Nicky's third novel, *The Italian Wedding* (Orion, \$38.99), has just hit bookstores. Peppered with moreish pasta recipes, it's the tale of half-Italian wedding dress designer Pieta, who uncovers the secrets of her parents' courtship and a mysterious family feud while stitching her sister's wedding gown. Though the primary setting is London, flashbacks to Rome and the family village yield the same flavour as Nicky's previous novels *Delicious* and *The Gypsy Tearoom*, both set in Italy.

Is it mere coincidence that these are also the names of a Grey Lynn, Auckland bar and Italian restaurant on either side of the same road? Well yes, but Nicky did realise she was name-sharing. "It's kind of a mad in-joke really," she says. "I tried to call the next book *Savour & Devour* [after a café in the same block] but I decided against it," she quips.

The Italian Wedding is based not just on Nicky's lifelong romance with all things Italian but on the true story of her parents' romance. Like Pieta's mother Catherine, Nicky's English-rose mother Sylvia hitchhiked with friends to Rome ("an amazingly daring thing to do in 1958"), where she met husband-to-be Eduardo, a →



Former women's magazine editor Nicky enjoys the more relaxed feel of working from home and says she's saved from "complete slovenliness" by the occasional beauty launches she still attends.



reformed heartbreaker who soon moved to England and got a job on the docks.

While characters Beppi and Catherine are based on her parents, Nicky takes pains to point out they're works of fiction. Still, her England-based parents – who've been staying with Nicky and director husband Carne Bidwill in their Point Chevalier, Auckland home – were understandably eager to get their hands on an advance copy. "I was panicking, telling them it's not real," laughs Nicky. "But they both loved it. Now every time they fight, my father says, 'You should've put this in the book about your mother!'"

Like Nicky's other books, *The Italian Wedding* is also about women battling for control of their lives and futures. Self-doubting Pieta wonders whether to quit her secure job to set up solo as a wedding-dress designer. Any parallels between Pieta's journey and Nicky's own journey from editor to author? "A little bit of me was remembering teetering on the edge, thinking, 'Shall I jump, shall I go?' Like Pieta, I tend to worry about all the things which could go wrong."

Nicky says she's "obsessed with food", and her novels are imbued with foodie pleasure. But she keeps her svelte figure thanks to pilates, horse-riding and walking her two poodles (Charlie pictured here).

So what possessed a self-confessed worry-wart at the top of her game to throw in a plum job and a regular salary? "It's the weirdest thing to give up a good job, something you know you can do," admits Nicky, who'd always dreamed of writing books. But juggling writing with editing meant *The Gypsy Tearoom* was delivered to the publishers a year late. "Doing both was really stupid. To write, you need to empty your mind a bit but I was always thinking, 'Who's going on the cover' or 'I need some good sales figures'."

Then came the catalyst: She ghost-wrote Angela D'Audney's autobiography *Angela: A Wonderful Life!* while the broadcaster was dying of a brain tumour. Then Nicky's UK agent Maggie died unexpectedly on the operating table from an undiagnosed blood cancer. "These two women dying prematurely at about the same age [mid-50s] really reminded me that life's short and I should get on with it," says Nicky. "Also my husband kept saying, 'Just do it, let's worry about the problems when they arise,' and I realised he was right." So she quit

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her job to write full time, albeit while churning out two columns and the occasional freelance article on the side.

Although Nicky sometimes misses the buzz of putting a magazine together and the team camaraderie, she doesn't miss the rigour of a nine-to-five job or the requirement to get out of your pyjamas. "Beauty launches pull me back from the brink of complete slovenliness."

It's all a far cry from the little girl growing up with two younger brothers in an "ordinary working-class family" in small-town Wallasey near Liverpool. Whenever they could afford it, the Pellegrinos drove back to Italy to bunk down with her aunt's family in her father's childhood village, Giugliano, near Naples. "Neapolitans are the most passionate, volatile people, and I quite like that, while I found the English quite restrained," says Nicky. "I'm a mix of the two: you never really know where you are with me, then I have a temper tantrum!"

With a BA in English and a dream to work in London magazines, Nicky moved to the big smoke in 1986. "I lied my way up the ladder," she laughs. From a job updating an advertising directory she graduated to ad production, sub-editing, then writing and feature-editor jobs, mainly on women's and entertainment magazines.

Flying to New Zealand for ex-colleague Sarah-Kate Lynch's 1993 wedding, Nicky was looking forward to meeting a good friend of the bride's. "She told me he was rich, which turned out not to be the case, but I thought, 'Well, he's quite spunky and rich,' so I walked over and said, 'Hi, I'm Nicky and I'm going to marry you.' And he said, 'If you like.' I later discovered Carne says 'if you like' to lots of things!"

After a year of long-distance love, Nicky took up NZWW editor Sarah-Kate's offer of a deputy's job down under. "I was 30 and ready to put down roots so I decided to give it a year." And 14 years on she's still here.

Combining research with relaxation, Nicky flies to Italy for about a month every year or two. While not yet fluent – "I speak in a hideous pidgin way" – she sure knows her way around Italian dishes. The as-yet-untitled novel she's writing about a chef has spawned cravings for "beautiful, complicated dishes. I'm obsessed with food. Carne's the same; it's an unfortunate marriage in terms of staying thin." She attributes her trim figure to walking her two

dogs, horse riding and pilates. An ideal day is writing 9am-3pm then driving to Kumeu to ride her horse.

While admitting that writing pays the bills, Nicky bats away talk of her success. "I'm pretty much hopeless at everything else, so writing's really the only thing I can do," she laughs. "And I've got imposter syndrome; I always think someone's going to say, 'You don't know what you're doing.'" The trick to reminding herself she can write, she says, is to read a really bad book.

Currently she's head-down trying to finish work on her latest book (with a contract for another in 2010) and has even taken to writing in bed. "I said to my husband yesterday, 'At the moment I get the same time in my cell as a prisoner in Paremoremo!'"

The couple have chosen not to have children. "I never wanted to work full-time and have children," explains Nicky. "A lot of women I know do it and cope incredibly well but I just didn't think I'd be tough enough. And I didn't feel passionate enough about having children, otherwise I would have made it happen.

"A lot of my friends with kids keep telling me I'll regret it, but you can't spend your life thinking about what you might regret. Life goes incredibly quickly, so you've just got to do what you're passionate about." ■