

Fabulous

Thoughts on Being a Woman

Peta Mathias



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peta Mathias was born in New Zealand and began her career as a registered nurse before moving to Canada, where she lived for six years and worked as a toxicotherapist. She then lived in Paris for ten years and worked as a chef, running her own restaurant. Since 1990, she has been based in Auckland, where she writes books and fronts prime-time food and travel programmes. In 2006, she founded a company hosting gastronomic adventures in Uzès in the south of France, Marrakesh and Rajasthan, and in 2008 she set up her own television production company to produce cooking DVDs and television series documenting her culinary trips.

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DEDICATION

To my mother Ann - this is all your fault. And to my sisters, Keriann and Desirée, my sisters-in-law, Sharyn, Pip and Lou, and my nieces, Estée, Jessica and Alba.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the women who allowed me to interview them - your generosity and candidness is only what I would have expected of you - and to the women who answered the long questionnaires.

INTRODUCTION

Believe it or not, more than 99 per cent of male and female genes are exactly the same. That tiny 1 per cent influences each and every cell in our bodies, making our brain chemistry different, our hormones different, our thoughts, feelings and emotions different. The female brain is deeply affected by hormones - they shape our mood, values, behaviour and sexuality. Our brains can change a whopping 25 per cent every month and, as we all know, that is quite difficult to live with.

The technical research in this book is extremely reliable and that's where it ends. All the quoted surveys are suspicious in my opinion - everyone lies their heads off in surveys. I once said that I had outrageous G-spot orgasms in a survey - I don't even know where my G-spot is and strongly suspect it doesn't exist. All the other information has been gleaned from my haphazard life and my friends' experiences, and we are all highly flawed characters. All resemblances to real people are not coincidental. Nobody could make my friends up - the only sane people among the lot of them are the doctor and the shrink.

In the health and beauty chapter I discovered that the answer to the question, 'Do I look fat in this?' is 'Yes and so what?' The sex chapter made me realise there's no point in having a trick pelvis if there ain't no love. The relationship chapter answered my question, 'Am I liberated or do I just have concentration problems?' (The trick is to make it look like you're liberated.) The most important piece of advice in the travel section is that it doesn't matter where you are going or for how long - you only need one suitcase. I've got one thing to say to you about fashion - there are no more

rules except where white shoes are concerned: there is absolutely no occasion for wearing them unless you are a nurse or a bride.

We are living in an era of incredible wealth where food and gastronomy are concerned. Never before have we had so much choice, so much information and so many sundried tomatoes - so don't blow it. Don't pollute your temple with junk food. In my music and singing chapter you'll learn that there is no excuse for karaoke and you'll find out why good music transforms our lives and speeds us to states of intense happiness and emotional ecstasy. From the chapter on work you'll learn why you shouldn't put all your eggs in one bastard. If you want to change career, go and look at your school reports - it's very sobering and will show you where you went wrong in becoming an archaeologist when you were clearly meant to be a fashion designer. When you read what I have to say about health, beauty and hormones you'll be extremely disappointed. I'm very sorry to say that yes, you do have to eat your fruit and vegetables, you do have to stop smoking, but it's never too early in the day to have a glass of red wine.

It is said that the recipe for happiness is good health and a bad memory. If you're not born with a positive attitude-develop one quickly. Happy people do not have a secret. They are just naturally reckless and poetic and instinctively turn negative things around quickly.

This book covers subjects of interest to me and things I have experienced. This is why there aren't chapters on religion and spirituality, or exercise and sports. Wait - I do have experience of these things, which is how I knew not to write about them. You want religion? Look inwards. You want exercise? Walk to the wine shop. You can believe everything I have to say about food and travel because I know what I'm talking about, but I would treat the chapter on men with suspicion - it is a subject I have selflessly studied for most of my life and I have neither understood nor learned a thing.

Because I'd never asked a man what he wanted in a woman, I decided to throw some questions out to my male friends. Niagara Falls! They couldn't stop - a torrent of endless information poured out of them. Whoever said men don't talk? Women are the point of our lives, they said, we spend our whole existence trying to figure out what they want, how to get them, how to get them to stay, how to get rid of them, how to make them happy.

What qualifies me to pontificate on the state of womanhood? Nothing, but I've been around the block a few times. Also, I am the eldest of six children, a registered nurse, failed singer, a chef and a writer. All these trades are dependent on a person being nosy and fascinated by other people's lives.



1

FASHION: ASSET MANAGEMENT

Phyllis Diller said that the reason women don't play football is because eleven of them would never agree to wear the same outfit in public. Clothes are not for warmth, modesty or necessity. They are there to tell the story of you - who you are, what you do, how you feel about yourself, how you feel about the world. They convey your deepest complexes and display your highest self-esteem. A woman who wears jeans and a shapeless T-shirt day after day is saying, 'Hello. I don't want you to notice me because I have low self-esteem. I'd like my hidden beauty to stay hidden if you don't mind.' A woman who wears a tight red wrap dress and high heels is saying, 'Hello. Go ahead honey, have a good look - what you see is what you get.' A woman dressed in Laura Ashley is saying, 'Hello. I'm Pollyanna. I'd prefer you to think I had my children without having sex and that I only eat organic food.' A woman who's wearing a cowboy hat and a black T-shirt, is poured into skinny, studded leather jeans, and is shod in powder blue Doc Martens is saying, 'Hello. I'm a radical diesel dyke with a fun streak and a weakness for straight women.' A woman wearing Issey Miyake Pleats Please is saying, 'Yes. I'm a stylish intellectual. I should have gone to art school. I wear Miyake because I travel endlessly, darling, don't iron and I'm fabulous.'

EARLY INFLUENCES

We all get our first ideas about fashion from our families, at school and at church. In my childhood nuns were a source of crucial and compelling mystery. Naturally, I was determined to get to the bottom of their fashion sense. Anyone who wore so many layers in the summer heat had to have something to hide. It stood to reason. There were no mysteries to my mother's clothes - she wore a bra, knickers and a sundress all summer. But the nun's mediaeval outfit of black stockings, black shoes, long black habit, black veil and white head gear begged explanation. How could I have known that this look was the precursor to the standard magazine editor's outfit? I looked under their long robes (I was only five years old) and I found out what a strap felt like.

At primary school we girls wore heavy black shoes, thick black socks, a black pleated serge uniform with a yellow and black striped tie, black hat and black cardie. Tiny, innocent children all dressed in black to ward off the backsliding and heathenism waiting at every corner. Even at five a girl had to be vigilant. With my freckles, black curly hair and striped tie, I looked like an ambulant pedestrian crossing. This might be why I don't wear black now.

My secondary school uniform changed a little with the addition of the colour blue, which was rather lovely. Underneath were such titivations as suspender belts - white ones. Black was sinful. When I asked if I could have black underwear, I was told not to be a dirty girl. The boarders had their underwear controlled much more closely than day girls. Bikini briefs, which had just come into fashion in the sixties, were the height of depravity. Girls were encouraged to undress and bathe in a light cotton robe so as not to be tempted by their bodies. Due to a sustained outcry the nuns eventually dropped this nonsense but it remained mandatory to wear underpants to the waist. When boarders were caught with bikini briefs in their drawers, so to speak, the offending items took a trip to the incinerator, where

they belonged, thank you very much. The tripe coloured, lisle stockings were bullet proof and our bras would have survived a nuclear holocaust. That any determined boy got past all this to impregnate anyone is one of the remaining scientific mysteries of our time.

Formal balls were the order of the day when I started nursing in 1968 and petals was the hairdo. I was quite good at sewing so I made myself a gown of navy blue organza with tiny white dots on it, empire line with a white ruffle around the low neck. Black eyeliner, brown arcs of eye shadow, false eyelashes and pale pink lipstick were the minimum requirement. The father said, 'Careful you don't lose your balance, girl.' The mother said, 'You look much better without make-up, Peta.' Mothers. What did they know? Better without make-up? By this time I wouldn't have even considered going to the toilet in the morning without make-up. False eyelashes were only for big dos; the rest of the time three layers of mascara plastered on with tiny brushes and spit sufficed.

In the seventies it didn't take long for me to become fully engaged in the hippy revolution, but most of my straight nursing friends didn't join me. How could this be? How could you live in society, be at a formative stage in your life, and not be moved at all by what was going on all around you? How could you carry on with the old values and conservative mind-set when you were being offered freedom, excitement and unprecedented supplies of alfalfa sprouts? How was it possible that a girl would continue wearing tasteful camel Angora twin sets, pearls, tights and hairspray when she could be decked out in macramé coats, antique white lace from the Salvation Army shop, sandals and beads? Then there was the question of armpits. How could anyone be so gross as to shave off their natural, God-given woman hair when they should not be bending to the male conspiracy to reduce women's strength? After I graduated and left nursing behind I was gainfully employed

sewing beautiful clothes for the Brown Street market, just like the ones I made for myself. Selling the pin-tucked, white cotton and Liberty print, ribbon bedecked dresses I produced at home on my sewing machine was much more fun than irrigating people's kidneys at the hospital.

BRAS

The bosom fascists tried to tell us that wearing bras gave you cancer. The theory was that those saviours of dignity, our pink lacy bras, constricted the lymph nodes in the armpits and prevented toxins from being flushed out of our bodies. According to some doctors, breast fat stores many of the chemicals and toxins that enter the body and wearing a bra can impede the exit of such poisons. Why would all those chemicals go straight to our breasts? A bra is not a straitjacket - it's just a support mechanism. Unless you are really stupid and wear your bra too small or too tight (which apparently a lot of women do), there doesn't seem to be any connection between that undergarment and breast cancer. You might get out of breath, though, from a too-tight bra pressing on your ribcage and diaphragm.

G-STRINGS

Don't start me on G-strings. Nobody had ever heard of a G-string before some stripper convinced people they were a great idea - the most revolting, uncomfortable garment in the history of the world. It looks awful, damages your skin, and causes infections. The string part is the problem - it causes genital inflammation, which spreads bacteria and fungus like thrush. None of this applies to strippers and burlesque dancers because the G-string is part of their uniform.

SHAPE CONTROL

When we burned our bras in the seventies we also burned our girdles and any other restricting undergarments, but we kept our garters for the bedroom. Anyone who had to wear suspender belts and stockings to school cannot bring themselves to see these bulletproof inconveniences as sexy. Everyone went *au naturel*, your real girl shape was perfectly okay - we were all beautiful and fabulous in our own ways. Comfort was the order of the day. Well, that's all over. Believe it or not, we are again subjecting ourselves to tight, hot, sticky nylon Lycra to make sure the curves sit where God intended them, not where Nature has mistakenly moved them. New shape control underwear has exploded on to the fashion scene, with annual sales of more than £135 million in England and US\$735 million in the US. Trinny and Susannah's Magic Knickers and Control Pants are walking out of the shops in hordes, the US brand Spanx is a sell-out on websites like Figleaves.com, and Rago Waist Cinchers have increased sales by 200 per cent in the last year. In 2007, from April to June, Marks & Spencer sold five pairs of Control Pants a minute - 7670 pairs a day. Who knew there was so much elastic in the world?

Why are we doing this? Because we're sick of dieting and exercising and we too want to look like Scarlett Johansson or Kylie Minogue. Most people don't get to see us naked anyway, so why not cheat? Fashion designers ask us to wear impossibly waisted suits, nipped-in dresses, high-waisted trousers and pencil skirts. You can drop up to two dress sizes in the time it takes you to pull on a super shaper slip. According to Trinny and Susannah, the absolute secret to wearing clothes you never thought you could even look at is helpful underwear. Doctors warn that shape control garments can cause deep vein thrombosis and may compress nerves by restricting the supply of blood to the legs. Since when did anyone listen to what a doctor thinks when faced with a great fifties-style dress with big flowers all over it?

ASSET MANAGEMENT

This is where truth in advertising comes in. Be careful what your clothing is saying subliminally. There's no point in wearing tight black leather and Versace if you're not prepared to put out and haven't worked through your father issues; no point in chador if you've got Gucci underneath (although I'm sure Arab men see the point); no point in wearing counter-culture-fuck-the-establishment black if you go to shows called *The Sound of Music*. Just like there's no point in hanging out in a funky inner-city suburb in designer T-shirts if you live in Whatever Heights and your maid irons your jeans. We know who you are. Elitism? No. Truth in advertising. Be true to yourself. Having said that, being true to yourself might not be a good ploy if you are boring – in that case it's okay to deceive. There's a great Zen saying – act as if and soon you will become.

Why do women wear black – are there that many funerals in the world? If you're not Italian, a nun or a magazine editor, there's no excuse for it. Okay, so if you're going to wear black it has to be for the right reasons and you have to have the right attitude, otherwise you're just black-lite. If you're not one of the above, you have to be a left-wing intellectual, in public relations or a manic depressive to wear black. And don't smile when you wear black – look fuck-off and mysterious or people won't know you're depressed, they'll just think your teeth are sewn together. And it has to be the right black – dead black. Don't mix blacks. And dye your hair black too. The biggest lie in the world after 'but darling you're the one I really love' is 'black makes you look thinner'. Fat people in black just look dowdy and surprisingly like fat people in black. Fat people in colour look fabulous and happy and sexy. My friend Tanah is a voluptuous woman and she wears tight colourful tops, fitting trousers, red lipstick and a beautiful smile. She looks gorgeous.

In asset management there are two schools of thought: the wear-what-you-like-it's-nobody's-business school, and the wear-what-suits-you-to-best-show-off-your-assets school. Intellectually, I belong to the first school; culturally, I belong to the second. When I was growing up my mother was fashionable. She always dressed beautifully and made it clear to me that I would go to prison if I wore brown and purple on the same day. There are now no rules, but that doesn't give you a licence to kill - you still have to be in touch with reality.

Here's an example of what not to do. Let's call this woman Marigold. I've known her for years and she's a classic example of bad asset management. We all know the type. Marigold has large, wrinkled, flabby breasts, so she wears very low cut tops to expose them. She is overweight, so she wears transparent dresses with G-strings. Her arms are flabby, so she wears sleeveless tops. She has great legs, so she covers them up. She has lovely skin, so she roasts in the sun for hours. The effect is grotesque, she sort of suspects it, her friends are powerless to change her, and she's now in her early sixties, desperately peddling backwards. If Marigold wore beautiful, stylish clothes that covered the bad bits and revealed the good bits, she would be a truly stunning woman. Her comment to this would be: I have no complexes. My comment would be: for the sake of everyone else, get some.

Dressing inappropriately for your age is not only an external problem - it's also internal. You need to find out why you can't let go of being in your twenties. It is very hard to accept, especially if you were beautiful and relied on attention and compliments to feel good. A therapist would probably get you to make two lists: the good things and the bad things about being twenty, thirty, forty . . . Wearing young clothes doesn't make you look young - it makes you look tragic and lost and strangers feel sorry for you. If you are wearing clothes from another era in your life it doesn't

just mean you're out of fashion, because who cares, it means you haven't gone on to the next wonderful stage in your life. You are different in your thirties, forties, fifties – your hair changes colour, your body changes shape, you are different inside and none of it is bad, it is just different.

The world hasn't seen my arms for ten years, but it does see my breasts occasionally because they're still under control. Nobody is going to lose sleep over my legs, so I don't wear short skirts. If you've got great legs, show them. Asset control. Also, nobody ever benefited from loose clothing – we all look better in fitted clothes, no matter what shape we are. Girls, if you don't have a drop-dead body, I don't want to see your pubic hair or love handles in low-cut jeans, thanks. Just because it's fashionable, doesn't make it okay. One of my nieces wears low-cut jeans and low-cut tops but she's a six foot goddess with a drop-dead body. Most of us aren't.

I remember when a dated, wannabe queen voted me the worst-dressed woman in the country something like three years in a row. On a morning television show I was being interviewed about this and other things (like my fabulous dress sense) and the host had hidden this lump of ectoplasm off-stage. She asked me if I was ready to forgive him. The jerk was waiting in the wings for my forgiveness. I replied no. When might I be ready? How long did I think a person should be punished? I replied that I am Irish and that we don't do forgiveness – we're still weeping over things people did to us two hundred years ago and that the punishment was for life. It's a sub-division of the Don't Fuck With Me syndrome. This worst-dressed woman story got a lot of press, mostly I think because journalists know I suffer from DFWM syndrome and can therefore be relied upon to spit acid. In another interview I thanked the ectoplasm for curing my constipation problems. I had a photo of him and his worst-dressed list on the wall next to my toilet and every time I looked at him, it all came away.

IRREVERENT, WITTY AND UNPREDICTABLE

When I lived in Paris in the eighties the fashion buzz words were 'irreverent', 'witty' and 'unpredictable'. I couldn't see what was new in that - it sounded like what I had been doing for the last twenty years. Fashion writers can always be counted on to use the word 'story' at least thirty-seven times in an article. We had the English Tea Dance Story, the Decadent Opulence Story, the Bolivian Mountain Girl Story and the Dominatrix Story. Do these people seriously sit at their desks and think up these 'stories'? Have they ever been to Bolivia? Do they know that Bolivian mountain girls wear the same dress and no knickers every day of the year? I know this because I went to Bolivia. I didn't see a 'story' in two weeks. Naturally, the fashion conscious girl out there in La Vie Ordinaire Story related instantly to being irreverent, witty and unpredictable. Not. Any well-brought-up girl wouldn't have known what dominatrix meant. I only happened to know because across the road from my apartment in Paris there was a huge poster of a girl lashed together with a complicated arrangement of chains and whips. Her name was Madame Dominatrix. I put two and two together.

After carefully analysing the photos in *Vogue* I came to the conclusion that irreverent, witty and unpredictable meant revival psychedelic (like it wasn't bad enough the first time), leopard print platforms (again) and hot pants (less than one per cent of the population can wear them). The hot pants made me extremely nervous - why do fashion editors tell you to commit such acts against decency? I admit I am a fashion victim, but there are certain rules:

1. Do not wear white shoes ever, under any conditions, unless you are a nurse or a bride.
2. Do not appear at the breakfast table in transparent clothing, no matter what charming lies your lover told you the night before.
3. Do not wear mini or micro clothing if you have Botticelli thighs.