

Sassy at 60

*Culinary
adventurer,
author and
our very own
columnist
Peta Mathias
tells Fiona
Barber about
her milestone
birthday and
her irreverent
new book
about men.*

FLICK THROUGH THE PAGES of Peta Mathias' new book *Just in Time to be too Late: Why Men are Like Buses* and you could find yourself thumping the nearest surface with whole-hearted agreement and bellowing, "Yes ... Yes ... YES!" It might be her assertion that "when you ask a man what he is thinking and he says 'nothing' he is speaking the truth", that strikes a loud note. Or it could be her observation that men can't read body language so you have to ask for what you want using clear, simple words and, sometimes, sign language, that rings true at deafening decibels.

The follow-up to Peta's best-selling guide to womanhood *Can We Help it if We're Fabulous?* is a risqué romp through the male mind. It was an expedition she never planned to take – "a virgin would know more about men than me because she's probably listened more" – until her publisher suggested she venture into >>>

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEIL GUSSEY STYLING BY ANNA CASELBERG MAKE-UP BY CLAUDIA RODRIGUES



“EVEN HELEN CLARK, WHO’S THE BUSIEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD, KNOWS HOW TO COMB HER HAIR.”

testosterone territory. Make no mistake, her new book, her 11th, might be about the male of the species but it was written especially for women. It is an unashamed wink and nod to the sisterhood and what they reckon they’ve known all along. It is also about as scientific as a Mills & Boon novel. “I interviewed men for this book because, well, I can’t make everything up.”

The title? The first part is a reference to men’s reticence to have health check-ups, particularly for diseases such as prostate cancer. They arrive for doctors’ appointments, just in time to be too late. The second: men are like buses because you “wait and wait and wait and then several come at once”.

The flame-haired chef, author, culinary tour guide, TV presenter and columnist for The Australian Women’s Weekly is reclining on her sofa, legs stretched out, talking about everything from her book on blokes to Botox; from liaisons with bad boys to her big birthday this month. Nothing is off-limits: not her age (60), not her Botox appointments (unbelievably painful), not her tumultuous long-ago relationship with a man she called Screw (“I thought that when people loved you they didn’t accidentally fall into other people’s beds”).

“I’ve been very, very angry with some men and I’ve been violent to some in my passionate youth,” she admits. “But I never felt like sticking a knife in them. Most of us have built-in mechanisms to stop us from doing that,” Peta says.

Neither is the disappointment that her long-running food show, first screened in 1995, was not renewed by TVNZ.

“I had *Taste* for 12 years and they stopped it without saying one single word to me. Not even thank you,” she reveals. “I sooo missed TV, I started my own production company with Jeff and Jane Avery. I’m a performer.”

And readers beware, this interview, like the book, is Peta with the naughty filter switched off. “Because I had got away with so many risky things in the pink book [*Can We Help it if We’re Fabulous?*], the publishers thought, ‘Let’s really unplug her.’”

“I was nervous talking about sex and relationships ... but you wouldn’t believe how many 80-year-olds didn’t bat an eyelid at the pink book. My mother read it and she’s 90.”

The new blue book – also an ode to “gorgeous and fabulous” men, albeit with humour-tipped barbs – traverses relationships; the fact that most men do not decide to be gay just to get on their fathers’ nerves; why blokes are such inept liars; the mysterious cult of male sports; and the fact that some men love children so much they go on to have more and more of them with progressively younger women.

Peta once had a glimpse of maleness when, in the interests of research, she had a testosterone injection to try to become “stronger and more focused”. In the pink book she wrote, “Even the small amount I was given had the most extraordinary effect and I realised what it was like to be a man. I could not stop thinking about sex – morning, noon and night. I looked longingly at bus drivers, power poles and schoolboys – anything would have done. A donkey would have done.”

“I found it hard to concentrate and work, and couldn’t wait to get back to my normal oestrogen-flooded girl self.”

The blue book was penned in Peta’s little villa bordered by a little white picket fence. I hadn’t had her pegged as a picket fence kinda gal. Neither had she, until she fell out of love with

her city apartment and in love with the house in a tree-lined street in a central Auckland suburb. It was being starved of green that did it. She craved grass under foot and a vista other than a shades-of-grey cityscape.

Crouching behind the fence palings, however, are telltale signs that a colourful woman lives within – baby hibiscus bushes have been planted in the hope they’ll produce a riot of blousy blooms.

Peta’s life is shot with vivid shades: her trademark vermilion hair, her colour-soaked wardrobe, the pink book, the blue book, a production company called Red Head Media ... If she was a piece of art, she says, she’d be a great big painting awash with tangerine and yellow.

“That’s one of the ways you make yourself happy, by wearing colour,” says the woman who hasn’t seen her natural hair shade since 1983.

In one of her columns for this magazine, Peta explained her dyed locks this way: “Nobody’s fooled when a middle-aged woman has fire engine-red hair, but they do think she is having fun and is beyond worrying about what people think of her.”

In truth, she does care. Deeply. “I have too much pride not to care. I have a responsibility to look as good as I can.”

Accordingly, she has regular Botox treatments. “I’ve had it here,” she says pointing to the sea of calm above her eyebrows. “I can’t frown. It [Botox] moves eyebrows so they’re still where God intended them to be, rather than where nature mistakenly sent them.”

A face lift? Absolutely nothing wrong with that, she maintains. “I’m still waiting for TVNZ to increase my cosmetics allowance. They owe me a face lift.”

Intellectuals and academics are permitted to let their appearances go, according to this (red) head prefect of personal grooming, but certainly no one else. “Even Helen Clark, who’s the busiest woman in the world, knows how to comb her hair.”

PETA WAS ALWAYS going to be an entertainer. As a child she had “ballet lessons, Irish dance lessons, theatre, singing, piano ... really, I should have been Madonna; I underachieved”.

And she was rebellious and strong-willed to boot. “My brother said, ‘I don’t understand why you rock the boat all the time. I stay away from those rocky waters; you walk into them.’ I don’t think I was a very nice child. I was so precocious.”

Peta was the firstborn child in a big Catholic family from Auckland and food was always a focus. “I always loved cooking. I was the eldest of six so I cooked for the family.”

She attended St Mary’s College in Ponsonby where she had singing lessons from the late, famed Dame Sister Mary Leo. Learning to sing was a joy, but learning to toe the line at a convent school was a different matter entirely. “I had no sense of diplomacy ... I got into terrible trouble with the nuns. I thought diplomacy was a form of lying.”

She also went head-to-head with her mum. “No one was going to tell me what to do. Me and my mother had an ongoing battle for supremacy until I was about 30. It took us years to reach a truce. >>>



Peta’s culinary escapes take her and her guests all over the globe. In these pictures she’s in Rajasthan, India, and in France.



PHOTOGRAPHY: HENRI COMTE AND COURTESY OF DAVID HORSMAN, PETA’S BUSINESS PARTNER AND OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPHER FOR THE GASTRONOMIC TOURS.



MATHIAS ON MEN

From *Just in Time to be too Late: Why Men are like Buses:*

- For women “yes” and “no” are words; for men they are sentences.
- Modern man has outrageous quantities of testosterone, which exceed today’s biological requirements and create havoc.
- A lot of men think monogamy is like mahogany: You don’t need the real thing. No one will know – a veneer will do.
- On the signs of a man’s sociopathic devotion to rugby: His relationship with his team is the longest, most rewarding relationship he has ever had and he displays an abnormal, indifference to wet, cold, testicle-rotting weather.
- Men cannot think like women so there is no point expecting them to.
- Father’s Day was invented in America in 1908 so that men wouldn’t get jealous of Mother’s Day. As if they didn’t get enough attention.
- Let men know: A hard-on does not count as personal growth.
- On how to tell if your husband is gay: There are mysterious absences always explained by “I was at the supermarket”, and he has more shoes than you do.
- Because women’s power is in their beauty and men’s is their money, nobody even thinks about how desperately dreadful it is for an older, handsome man to be ignored by a younger woman ... the only way to escape this cruelty is if they are famous – the ugliest broadcasters in the world have all the production assistants jumping all over them ... the women get younger and younger until the men are practically dating sperm.
- If your little boy is showing gender non-conformity, give him the pink nail polish and thank God you’ve got a man with good taste in your family.
- Believe it or not, most men lie to avoid causing pain and to preserve their relationship.



In the countries she visits, Peta roams the produce markets, embraces the culture and enjoys local fare in restaurants and people’s homes.





“BOTOX MOVES EYEBROWS SO THEY’RE STILL WHERE GOD INTENDED THEM TO BE, RATHER THAN WHERE NATURE MISTAKENLY SENT THEM.”

“I now see her qualities and I see her as an interesting person, rather than the ‘mother battle’.” And here’s a surprise: “We’re a lot alike.” Playing the tact game is still something she struggles with. “It’s not my nature to be guarded, I’m far too frank. That’s what makes you an entertainer.”

After school Peta trained and practised as a nurse, became a counsellor, then launched herself into a decade-long Parisian adventure. She eventually ran her own restaurant, Rose Blues, and wed a gay Frenchman so she could stay in France. Her husband from this marriage of convenience, Alexy, was a “beautiful young man” who died from Aids after Peta had returned home in 1990.

Back in Auckland, she decided to write an account of her Paris adventure and in 1994 *Fête Accomplie* was published. A TVNZ producer spied a review of the book and Peta, who was running her own café, was asked to audition for a new telly food show called *Taste*. “I went to a TV coach and said ‘help me’. I was an unknown; I’d just come back from France, I just really wanted that job. I knew it would change my life and it did.”

Producer Irene Gardiner, Peta says, had to fight for her because she was “not TV One”, but she won the job anyway. The ratings, she adds, were enormous.

Such was the joy of the role, “I never considered it as a job”. A downside to becoming well known – and being outspoken – has been learning to deal with the public’s opprobrium.

“They criticise my hair, my voice ... they say ‘I’m thrilled with myself’ and not a very good cook. But if you want to have a public persona you have to take what comes with it.”

There is one criticism, however, she might wear with a greater degree of acceptance. If you are driving through Auckland and suffer road rage by redhead, chances are the culprit is a motorist called Mathias. “I scream at people ... I just drive along telling other people how to drive. It’s pathetic.”

THANKFULLY, PETA IS OFF THE ROAD and preparing for a whirlwind trip to England to promote her pink book, *Can We Help it if We’re Fabulous?* when The Australian Women’s Weekly crew pulls up outside her house. The book sold out in the first weekend it went on sale here and more than 15,000 copies have been sold. She’s hoping the Brits will also embrace it, although she’s not sure they’ll “get her”.

As it turned out, however, some telly executives did and while she was in London a distribution company bought the worldwide rights for her new television series on Marrakesh. The series will screen on Prime TV in New Zealand next year.

After London, she turned her attention to celebrating six colourful decades on the planet. She spent her 60th birthday in Marrakesh with her friend Adriano who “throws sumptuous parties with handsome Moroccan staff, belly dancing, fabulous food made by his cook Amina and has old movies like *Casablanca* showing on the wall”.

On Friday 13 November, she will also host a 1970s-themed charity birthday bash at the Auckland Museum to raise funds

for the Auckland Multiple Sclerosis Society.

You get the feeling that although she is marking the big 60 Peta’s not about looking back. She’s more about the next adventure, be it a culinary tour through Rajasthan or her next naughty literary foray. “I can’t stop writing and now I’m writing a third [non-food] book. I’d like to write a book on sex explaining the difference between fresh air and an orgasm.

“I don’t feel any different from when I was 40 or 50,” she says. “I put on a bit of lipstick and it seems to be okay. In some ways I don’t feel old, but if my attitude hasn’t changed ... I suspect I will be just as immature at 90.”

How people live today, she says, is a far cry from the sort of life her own mother led. “Less children, more money, more work, expensive clothes ... we do extract more from life. We expect to eat beautiful food, to have a nice house, a successful marriage ...

“In a way life is harder now than in my parents’ day. They knew what was expected and did their best. We have such a lot of pressure on us and more people suffer from depression.” This, she says, is outlined by Oliver James in his book *Affluenza*, which lays the blame for our unhappiness on our quest for more.

But Peta is happy with her lot. “I taught myself how to be happy as a child. My psychiatrist friend said normally you do learn to do it yourself. No one chooses to be miserable but they don’t have the tools to make themselves happy.”

The nuclear family never truly featured in her plans for happiness. “I don’t think I was ever wife or motherhood material,” she says without any hint of emotion. “I did have the physical urge to reproduce, but then I asked myself whether I would want to be stuck with the guy. Mostly the answer was no.”

That’s not to say she’s been starved of love. Far from it. The aforementioned Screw featured large in her younger years. “We thought we were made for each other ... he wasn’t the first or only man I’ve loved but he affected me the most.

“I am not in a relationship at the moment but I am happy with a man or without a man. It’s not a man who is going to make you happy-ever-after. It is you.

“My house, my job, writing, TV, gastronomic tours – all the jobs I do give me a lot of pleasure and they’re really not like work,” she says with her trademark crimson smile.

“Then I come home to this dear little cottage. I’m so happy here it’s almost a problem. It’s almost like being moored; I don’t feel the need for any external stimulation.”

But this month, there is a book to launch: her oestrogen-skewed take on the mysteries of maleness. There is also an admission that despite all the ribbing, she really does like men. A lot. “They are gorgeous and fabulous and I really realised that when I was writing this book.” ■

Just in Time to be too Late: Why Men are Like Buses is out now (Penguin, RRP \$35). For more information about Peta and her adventures visit www.petamathias.com. To find out when Peta is talking about her book in a town near you, visit www.penguin.co.nz.



THIS PAGE: PETA WEARS DRESS FROM TRELISE COOPER, EARRINGS AND RING FROM SAMANTHA WILLS AND HER OWN NECKLACE. PREVIOUS PAGE: PETA WEARS TOP AND CARDIGAN FROM TRELISE COOPER AND NECKLACE BY MARNI FROM SCOTTIES.