

feral, *funny*, feminist

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In a back street in leafy North London, in a two-storey house with stone front steps and a box of books – novels, kid’s titles, rock biographies – awaiting collection by the front door, lives a feminist raised by wolves.

So biting are her observations, so cunning and voracious her demands, that her presence is said to make grown men quake and children and baby animals run for cover. Or at least that’s what some would have us believe.

“Hiya,” says Caitlin Moran, welcoming me inside with a hug. An open-plan kitchen is bright and neat, with things aligned in ways that suggest a cleaner: four placemats are laid out on a dining table; a row of mugs hangs above a bench. “Lady Sex Pirate” reads a mug I’ve seen on Moran’s website alongside merchandise including “Period Drama” red undies.

“Coffee or wine?” She’s wearing baggy jeans and a sky-blue shirt the colour of her eyes; her hair, newly shorn, without the wild platinum streak that had become her trademark, is a chestnut bob. “I’d join you in a wine but I’ve got a physio appointment later, f... it.”

Moran, 41, is an award-winning journalist, author and television screenwriter who famously tweets, smokes and talks a lot. Like, a real lot. But what she has to say is often absorbing and inspirational, and always articulate and honest. And funny: humour is her weapon, her disarmer. (“You cannot be oppressed if you are laughing at your oppressor,” she’s said.)

“My brain is permanently overloaded; it dribbles out my ears and leaves stains on the pillow,” she told *The Independent* newspaper in 1994, a year after she got her own column in *The Times*, which she still has, and was working as presenter on a TV show called *Naked City*, which she chucked in.

“I was crap at being on television,” says the mother of two teenage girls once we’re ensconced on the back patio. “But I’ve never wanted to be famous. Okay, maybe among my peers, and to impress

No topic is taboo for award-winning writer Caitlin Moran. Jane Cornwell spends an entertaining afternoon with her at her London home.

boys a bit, but the idea of being recognised in the street is like ...”

She grimaces, pulling her mouth sideways. Moran has the most expressive face, as anybody who has watched her YouTube Moranifestos – advice on everything from high heels (bin ‘em) to compliments (accept ‘em) – will testify. Her readiness to take the mickey out of herself, and the way she injects fun and optimism into feminism, equipping a generation of young women with tools to break down sexism and objectification, are what make her so likeable.

“Being a writer is what I love best, and if everybody knows who you are, the atmosphere changes and you can’t report on anything. Which is why I cut my hair.” She looks around her garden, with its *Alice in Wonderland* theme, and smiles. “In summer this is perfect. I sit out here all day, thinking, smoking and writing, and I’m as happy as Larry.”

She reaches for her rolling tobacco. “But I sometimes do these 2000-seater live gigs, and the [book] signings afterwards go on for hours. I meet these incredible girls who hug me and say they want to be able to tell their stories without having them boxed off into a woman’s experience. Who want to feel that being a girl is normal, simple as that.”

The books for which Moran is best known, 2011’s *How to Be a Woman* (a memoir-cum-polemic that has sold more than a million copies in 16 countries) and 2014’s semi-fictional *How to Build a Girl* (which has sold even more), are imaginative and empowering guidelines largely aimed at females under 30. *How to Build a Girl* is the first of a trilogy (*How to Be Famous* and *How to Change the World* are on the way); a new book, *Moranifesto*, is her second collection of writing, its essays drawing on her increasingly politically charged columns.

Poverty, class, abortion, menstruation, masturbation ... no topic is taboo for Moran, who argues her points with a clear-eyed fearlessness while refusing to be a spectator in the lives of men. Why, she asks, would any woman want that?

Forget lame-ass phrases like “girl power” and “equalism”. “Feminism,” she writes in *How to Be a Woman*, “is simply the belief that women should be as free as men, however nuts, dim, deluded, badly dressed, fat, receding, lazy and smug they might be. Are you a feminist? Hahaha. Of course you are.”

The eldest of eight children born to an Irish father, a drummer who left school to become “the only white guy in a black jazz group”, and a mother who’d graduated from university but home-schooled all her kids, Moran was brought up in a council house amid “hippie intellectual weirdness”. At 13, she won a competition for an essay titled *Why I Like Books*. At 15, she was *The Observer’s* Young Reporter of the Year. At 16, she had her first novel published.

“Lots of times people tell me how brave I am to write so honestly about things which are perhaps different and unusual. I’d never really gone to school or university or worked in an office, so I didn’t realise how not normal that is. I thought everyone talked about this stuff because these are the important things.”

Still, for all her books, columns and music interviews (she met her husband Pete Paphides when both were freelancing for the rock rag *Melody Maker*), writing for television proved tricky. *Raised by Wolves*, the sitcom she penned with her sister Caz, might have hit our screens years ago had it not been rejected in 2006 by the BBC – who informed her they’d already got a sitcom with women in it, thanks, and weren’t due another one for two years.

Raised by Wolves is a whip-smart comedy that follows six socially isolated, home-schooled, council-estate-dwelling siblings and their sardonic single mother, Della. (Moran herself, though, was not so much raised by wolves as raised *in* Wolves – Wolverhampton, a city in the West Midlands.)

Main protagonists Germaine and Aretha are 16 and 15, a lusty brunette over-sharer and an introverted ginger-haired intellectual. With no other friends, they deal with life’s milestones in wildly varied, often inappropriate ways: going under-age clubbing; eating vast amounts of cheese; sharing a hatred for their pretty cousin, Cathy.

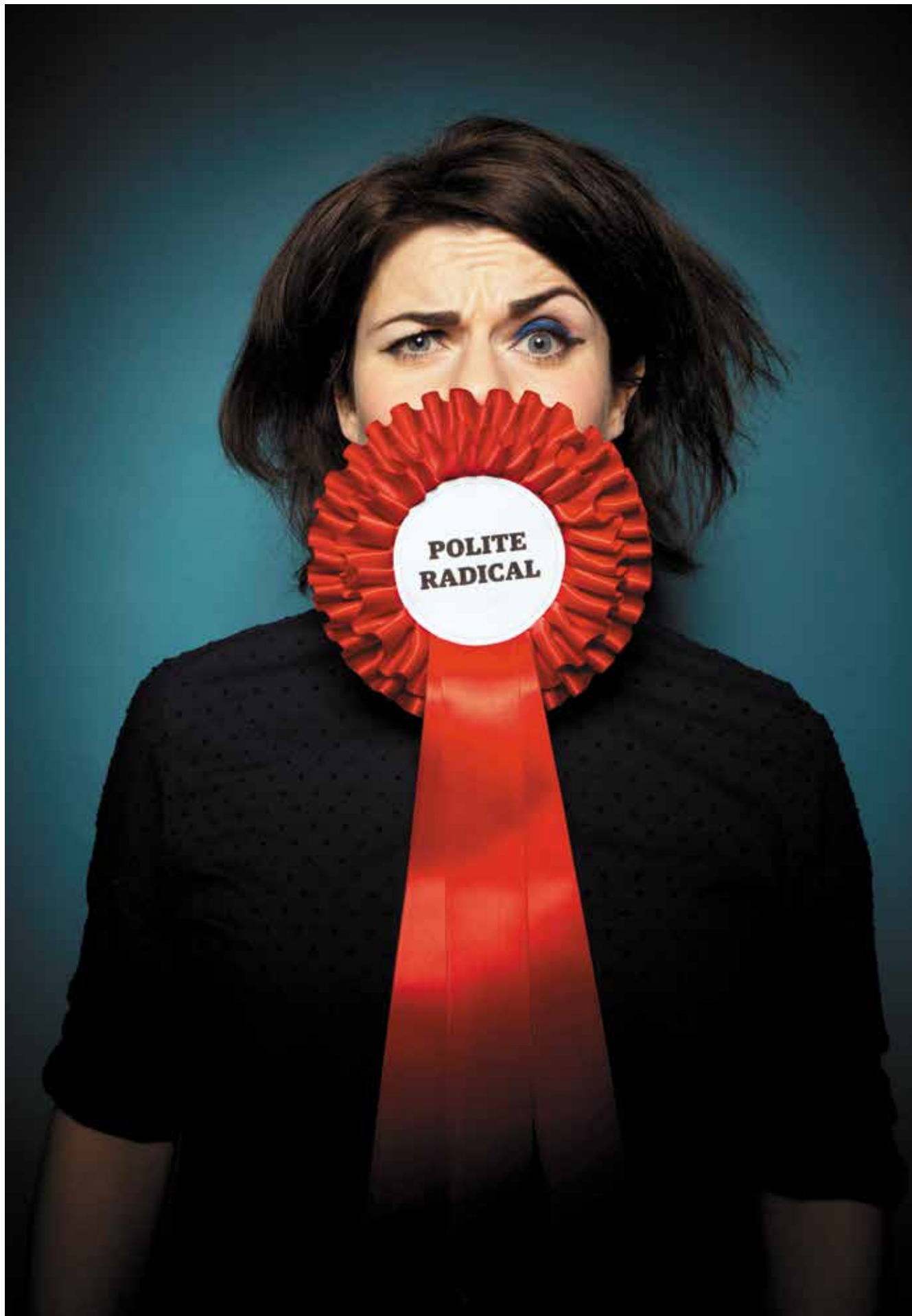
“The key thing was to show different girls, girls who are okay,” says Moran. “Girls who are not in constant crisis but deal with their problems like normal.”

As does their mother. “Della will never lie on the floor crying about an ex and saying, ‘I must have some chardonnay and see my gay friends.’ She’s got these big thighs” – Moran slaps her own, slimmer since having hypnotherapy to stop her overeating her way to deadlines – “and she wears overalls, uses power tools, smokes fags and handles stuff.”

“She’s Sarah Connor in *Terminator* and Ripley in *Aliens*, ‘cause being a mum is just like, ‘*Get away from my babies.*’” Moran fires a round from an invisible Uzi. “Except Della is on a council estate dealing with nits. She’ll have a can of cider and watch a nature program, or ring up blokes for sex, or be funny with her kids. She thinks she’s f...ing great.”

Popular culture should be a mirror, asserts Moran, whose maxim is “I cannot be what I cannot see”. While she loves that comics such as Amy Schumer are getting millions of hits on YouTube for sketches that make serious points while still being funny and joyful, she never saw characters on TV who looked like her or had her experiences. Until, that is, she created *Raised by Wolves*.

“Okay, I live in a giant house and talk in a posh voice but I’m still Jenny from the block,” she says. “I’m very aware that you don’t see people from the childhood



Photography by Richard Saker/Contour by Getty Images

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I had portrayed as anything other than benefit scroungers, drug dealers or people getting drunk and f...ing in alleyways. That’s not the working class I knew. Mine was bohemian and progressive, with a great sense of humour.”

Humour is what helps Moran deflate online trolls. And as a lefty columnist in a conservative newspaper, it’s what she uses to get readers to at least consider her point of view. “I try never to write in anger.” She drags on her roll-up. “If you’re trying to change people’s minds, you have to come at things from the angle of, ‘Let me start with something funny so you’ll come with me through this, and by the end I’ll change your mind.’”

More than anything, Moran wants to make change. For teenage girls. For society. “The point where children turn into women is where my work is,” she says fiercely. “And the first sign of society stabilising itself will be when girls stop having that period of self-loathing that seems to be a rite of passage. I want to ease those years.”

To the male critics who find her scary, who call her a feminazi, well, Moran couldn’t care less. “They are just silly boys, sitting at home alone cry-wanking and typing with one hand. Much more fun to be a cool feminazi, planning the revolution with a bunch of girlfriends.”

A grin. “You’ve already won, baby.”

Indeed, the most difficult thing Moran has faced of late is making the correct professional choices. “I had so many options after *How to Build a Girl* came out. I was offered a billion things and I’ve been insanely busy and exhausted for the past few years, but who could turn those opportunities down?”

Her pelvis is shot from sitting too much, she says (“I had to sit on a really demeaning saddle seat for a while and pretend it was a horse”), which reminds her that she’s late for her physio. Out on the street, to the sound of lawnmowers and birdsong, she gives me another hug. “Get in touch if you need anything else,” she says, padding off into the sun. •

Raised by Wolves is on SBS On Demand.