

Words, bundles of them, are floating over Kathy Lette's head. Handwritten on pieces of white paper, clipped to wires hanging from a ceiling lamp, one-liners, epigrams and *bons mots* hover like an overstuffed thought bubble above the self-proclaimed Miss Quiplash, aka the Mistress of Tongue Fu and the Mouth from the South. A bestselling author who – kitted out in lycra jogging pants and a blue top the colour of her eyes – is perched on a sofa underneath this cloud of punning and talking ... well, a lot.

"It's a 'poem light' I bought in a designer shop," says the Sydney-born writer of risqué bestsellers such as *Foetal Attraction*, *Mad Cows* and *Nip'n'Tuck*. "After drunken dinner parties I get all my mates to write quips and quotations, plus I put up a few of my own. It's a great way of remembering the night." She curls her bare feet, with their pedicured red toenails, underneath her tiny 162cm frame. At 49, she looks fantastic. "Some of the people who've written things are gone," she adds. "George Harrison. Douglas Adams. Spike Milligan. So it's even more precious to me now."

Lette is nearly as famous for her famous friends as she is for her wordplay. Despite her oft-repeated insistence that the "upper classes in England have a first-class degree in Further Condescension" and that "I left school at 15; the only examination I ever passed was a smear test", this "scrubber from Cronulla" is smack bang in the eye of the society she satirises. Brits love that she says things they'd never dream of. When she recently presented the winner's cup to the Princes William and Harry at a private polo match, she told them it was etiquette to kiss them. "Do you want tongue?" she twinkled. Um, maybe later, said William. Ooh yeah, said Harry. "They were killing themselves laughing; I ended

up hanging onto their thighs and they were dragging me about." Lette shrugs. "You know why it's worked? It's because I don't care. If you do care, people sense that you're trying too hard."

She does care, though. Or cares enough, at least, to need to stand out. Her punchy witticisms, wacky persona and test-pattern wardrobe with its short dresses and skirts (she says her legs are all she has left) are all part of her personal commandment, *Thou Shalt Not Bore*. A sort of literary rosella, Lette is the personification of her sharp and colourful oeuvre, in which wisecracking heroines variously fall in love, give birth, raise kids, get married, divorced and cheated on – but always come out on top. Call them what you like (she prefers "feminised satires on the plight of the working mother" to chick-lit), a Lette novel, like Lette herself, is fun.

Published in 120 countries, translated into 13 languages, she is more popular in Britain than anywhere else. For London's Aussie expats she's an unofficial ambassador, a kind of Les Patterson in Moschino, without the beer and the drool. This afternoon she's going power plating (a fitness craze that involves working out on a vibrating platform machine) with Dannii Minogue. Even before we meet – though we've met occasionally over the years – Lette shapes up as a dream interviewee. "*Shall we meet at my home or a hotel club at town ... It could be quite posh to sip champers in leather armchairs? Up to you darling,*" she emails.

So here we are at the big north London home she shares with her husband, human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson, 62, and their two children, Julius, 17, and Georgie, 15. There's also a rather sullen Romanian housekeeper named Lila, who brings us mugs of tea and some bland toasted cheese sandwiches for lunch ("I couldn't manage without my wife," says Lette, "though cooking isn't her forte."). Lette and Robertson have split the decoration

of their vast living room; his side boasts sombre antiques, hers the poem light, fluffy cushions and family photos – there's one of Julius poolside with Ian Thorpe – in gilt frames.

Guests love the big table football game over by the bay window. Once Salman Rushdie gets on you just can't get him off. They all love it: poet laureate Andrew Motion, writers and actors Julian Barnes, Richard E. Grant and Stephen Fry. Sometimes they bring games to play after dinner (along with adding to the poem light); Kylie once brought one where you wear Velcro caps and chase each other around throwing Velcro balls. Or they push the furniture back and dance like they did in 2004 at Rushdie's all-women stag night, right after *Puppetry of the Penis* and a feminist magician-cum-stripper had wowed a gaggle of gal pals including Robertson's ex, Nigella Lawson.

Fay Weldon stays here whenever she's in London. Actress Maureen Lipman and Ruby Wax are in Lette's book group ("We only ever review each other's books") and once every three months she enjoys getting together with scores of other big-name female scribes. Octogenarian John "Rumpole" Mortimer, the QC Robertson understudied in the 1971 *Oz* magazine trials, is one of their closest friends. Barry Humphries is a neighbour. "He's lovely," beams Lette (animated, it turns out, is her default position). "His house backs onto my house. Whenever he gets back from overseas he emails and says 'Kathy, I'm poised at your rear entrance'."

She laughs. I laugh. Given the bad press she gets from many Australian critics, I'm surprised at how much I like her – and by how much I enjoyed her new novel (more of which in a moment). Having hit on a formula that works, Lette continues to "cannibalise her own life" and has become her own brand in the process. Sure, much of her material has been recycled more times than a sock lost in a dryer. She might not be in ▶

Story Jane Cornwell

off

mouth

The princess of punning, queen of quiplash, saucy scribe of 10 naughty novels – Kathy Lette could be irritating as hell in the flesh. Or she could just be loads of fun ...



the same league as her favourite writers – the Brontës, Thackeray, Makepeace – but her social observations are arguably as timely as theirs ever were. Her loyal husband has said her books “play the role of court jester through the ages and have a serious moral purpose”.

At any rate, she’s great company, a girl’s girl with knobs (knockers?) on. “I have a fabulous gay Australian hairdresser who comes to the house and gives me a fannicure,” she says, lowering her voice confidentially. A what? “You know, collars and cuffs. Snatch to match. I’ll give you his number if you want.”

LETTE HAS ALWAYS CALLED HERSELF A FEMINIST. Her first book, *Puberty Blues*, written when she was 18 with then best friend Gabrielle Carey, caused a stir when it was published in Australia in 1979. Its semi-autobiographical story of two 13-year-old girls from Sydney’s southern beach suburb of Cronulla trying to ingratiate themselves with the mind-bogglingly sexist Greenhill surfer gang struck a chord with adolescents across the nation – myself included – and spawned an eponymous cult movie. Its authors became spokespersons for a generation of girls who’d suffered, smoked and had sex in suburbia. Who’d let the boys take the water while they stayed, minding the towels, on the beach.

“It’s as stringent as straight Vegemite with no butter,” says Lette of the novella she calls *Pubes*, which was re-released in Britain and Australia in 2004 with introductions by Germaine Greer and Kylie Minogue. “I think there were two copies in every house. Kids

were reading it going ‘Whoa, yeah!’ And parents were going, ‘My God, help! Our children!’ That’s why I’m friends with Kylie,” she continues. “She told me she sat up at night with a torch and devoured every line. I first met her when everyone was worshipping her and she was like” – Lette does a double take – “‘Oh wow, it’s Kath!’”

Now, 30 years later, Lette is back in Cronulla – and this time she’s in the water. Her tenth novel *To Love, Honour and Betray (Till Divorce Do Us Part)*, published by Bantam Press next Wednesday, sees English mother-of-two Lucy attempting to win back her husband by becoming a lifesaver on Cronulla beach. Being a Pom, of course, Lucy is especially pathetic, climbing out of windows in her teenage daughter’s miniskirt, lolling drunkenly on her kitchen floor and feeling about as useful, to coin a Lette-ism, as a chocolate teapot. The Other Woman is a childless, carefully preserved former best friend (“she’s based on a woman who had an affair with my [first husband]”). There’s a new best friend in the form of no-nonsense Aussie Sheila and some love/lust interest in a taciturn Aussie lifesaver and a hunky if precious ex-Etonian. The plot is as predictable as it is enjoyably preposterous, the gags both relentless and laugh-out-loud funny. Among the similes and one-liners – many of which skewer a topic in a single, merciless lunge – are glimpses of Lette the serious writer. “*The ocean crawled with whitecaps, like something alive. I stood on the bluff, watching the sea’s hypnotic boil ...*” She writes beautifully, effortlessly, about the sea.

“I was dying to write about my home town,” she says of working-class Cronulla. “As an Australian famous for *Puberty Blues* I wanted to do it from the other end of the scale. I went back to Cronulla to research this book and it was great to see all the girls surfing. Boys have flopped onto the shore and finally evolved ‘cause the girls won’t stand for it anymore. We did. We were human handbags.”

The second of four daughters born to Merv, a telephone engineer and former footballer, and Val, former headmistress of an infant school, the teenage Kathy was every parent’s nightmare: “I was the class clown, always drawing attention to myself, verbally tap-dancing all the time.” She chucked in Sylvania High School after fourth form (“I was impatient to see the world”) and, with bestie Carey, hitchhiked around Australia following the tour of the late great English writer and comedian, Spike Milligan.

“At a show in Sydney we went backstage and refused to leave until we met him. Then we just kept turning up wherever he was, which must have been *weird* for him. But he treated us as equals – he was so sympathetic and charismatic – and when he got very depressed we’d cheer him up [Milligan’s manic depression would be diagnosed years later]. He was our Saccharin daddy. Our sugar daddy with no sex.”

For a while they lived in a commune in Gosford, north of Sydney, then ricocheted into the punk era with a cabaret act called the Salami Sisters, busking in Sydney and living on fare donated by a local cake shop (“we told them we were from the runaway girls



The quipper and the QC ... Lette with her husband of 18 years, lawyer and “liberator of underdogs” Geoffrey Robertson.

hostel”). “I took every job going – I cleaned bedpans, was a human street sign – all while we were writing *Pubes*. My poor parents! *Pubes* was awful for my mum, who was like this pillar of society; she got a lot of horrible letters from pious pinstriped people.”

The new book was written partly by way of apology to Merv and Val. “I feel so guilty about the way I treated my parents, although I think all teenage girls have a ‘I find my mother contemptible’ clause in their contract. My daughter turned 13 and was suddenly so embarrassed that I wear short skirts and write books that are apparently full of sex. She still begs me to be

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; OLIVIA GRABOWSKI-WEST (MAIN)

normal. I got upset and then I thought, okay, handle it with humour.” Lette pauses, smiles. “So I picked her up from school wearing a tweed skirt, flat shoes, an apron covered in flour and a scarf around my hair like the Queen. Despite herself, she laughed.” She tells funny stories about her children, whom she clearly adores (“I agree with Georgie that getting her to let Salman’s stripper in and give her a glass of champagne was probably a bit weird”).

She says she felt like the successful one when she met Robertson on the set of his ABC show *Hypotheticals* in 1988. He was shackled up with Lawson; she was married to Kim Williams, then CEO of the Australian Film Commission (now CEO of Foxtel) and had been working as a sitcom scriptwriter in Los Angeles. She already knew the likes of Barnes, Motion and Rushdie, fellow guests at writers festivals. “I was the expert on teenage orgasms,” she says. Looking for a *Hypotheticals* guest in extreme contrast to ex-Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Robertson had asked for Kylie Minogue. The ABC sent him Lette instead. “It was filmed at Brissie Town Hall. We met, stayed up talking all night and two weeks later he asked me to marry him. I was already married, so I kind of had to sort that out first.” It was a case of opposites attracting: the urbane intellectual silk and the gobby, working-class surfer chick. But it’s worked. His job, she says, is to raise her tone. Hers is to lower his. “Happy wife = happy life” reads a Lette-ism pinned up on the poem light.

“He’s a workaholic,” she says. “He’s out there

liberating underdogs from their kennels. He can get laws changed in the European Court of Human Rights that affect Britain, Europe, Africa and the Caribbean,” she offers proudly. “I always say being married to a lawyer you get subpoena envy.

“See?” she continues while I laugh, “sometimes a pun is like a little haiku. No wonder Shakespeare and Chaucer loved them. You can say so much with just ...” She moves thumb and forefinger a whisker apart. And Lette has so much to say. “I do care passionately about things. I feel very political. I always try and write the book I wish I’d had when I was going through something.” When she couldn’t find anything in literature that talked about the travails of being pregnant and giving birth, she wrote 1994’s *Foetal Attraction*. Since then her books have mapped her experiences, along with those of her friends. “I like to think that I stick up for women. That I help them stand on their own two stilettos and not be pushed around by men.”

At some point, no doubt, there’ll be a *Menopause Blues*. But don’t expect Lette to slow down. A keen ocean swimmer when back in Australia (she’s here next month for a promotional tour, including an Early Risers breakfast at Palazzo Versace and a charity lunch in Brisbane on October 10), she is also a qualified scuba diver. “I caught the bug when we holidayed on Hayman Island a few years ago. It’s hallucinogenic, kaleidoscopic, totally enthralling. But you know what the big trouble is? You can’t talk.” She flashes a grin. “Which for me,” she says, “is agony.” ■