

***The Bride Stripped Bare* by Nikki Gemmell (Harper and Row, 2003)**

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide.

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The Bride Stripped Bare has, by all accounts, had an unexpected impact on the life of its author Nikki Gemmell. She made the decision to publish it anonymously but was found out. Accusing her of naivety and worse, manipulation, various journalists have done their best to make her life a misery since the secret became known.

I wonder how many of them have read the book. Gemmell's frankness is extraordinary, and, as she explains in her signed letter printed at the end of the book, anonymity provided the liberation she needed from all the forces which inhibit this kind of total exposure. *The Bride Stripped Bare* justifies her decision because of its honesty and vitality and its sheer quality.

This is *The Golden Notebook* for the new millennium. Gemmell has done for women of this era what Doris Lessing did for women of the sixties. But with her anonymity she has dispensed with the layer of knowing irony which Lessing has always protected herself with.

The Bride Stripped Bare is written entirely in the second person present, somehow maintaining an intimacy more complete than could be achieved by the seemingly more revealing first person. The main character is never named, although the other characters are – husband, best friend, lover, son. The impetus of the narrative is irresistible. It is a book which grips you and shakes you and demands to be read. It is extremely, explicitly, explosively erotic. But it explores emotions surrounding sex and love as well. In particular, I noticed that, unlike Doris Lessing's heroines, Gemmell's is often embarrassed. Dealing with

her embarrassment about expressing her desires and fantasies is part of the main character's development.

What she sets out to do, this 'good wife' who has never been sexually fulfilled, is to reverse the age-old sex roles and separate love from sex the way men appear to be able to. She tries to create the perfect lover, pliant and disposable. Of course it doesn't work, and she blows her life apart. The ending is enigmatic but we're just allowed to believe in a liberated and fulfilled future for her.

The writing is powerful and direct and sinuous. "You used to think your husband wasn't near as churning and smudged as yourself but even: clean, open, uncomplicated. Now you know there's a secret life you know nothing of and never will, and no one knows anyone's secret life." Secrets, betrayal, jealousy, love, infatuation, indifference: all these themes occur. With all her determination to shed inhibitions, the heroine – and she is heroic in a way – is still kept in the dark. There are mysteries which are solved: anonymous letters, suspected affairs – but there are other mysteries, both in herself and in others, which she will never penetrate.

Gemmell is now on the public record as the book's author, but she doesn't acknowledge it on her web site. The trouble with a book like this, for the author, is that everyone will assume that it's autobiography, however hard she tries to tell them it's fiction. But fiction doesn't work like that. A novelist will draw on her own experiences, yes, but the reader can't make any assumptions about what's based on literal truth and what isn't. *The Bride Stripped Bare* is a courageous and risky book and I have nothing but admiration for the woman who has dared to give the world such a searingly honest account of what a

modern woman's life can be like. Others have called it self-indulgent and naïve,
but this kind of truthfulness is what fiction is all about.