



MISS GEMMELL REGRETS

Anatomy of a PR campaign

Honesty can be the most shocking thing of all.

—Nikki Gemmell, *Age* Good Weekend, 2004

MARCEL DUCHAMP'S *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* was exhibited for the first time in 1926 at the Brooklyn Museum. Shortly after, it was accidentally broken. Duchamp, who had described the work as a "hilarious picture", carried out the laborious repairs himself. The piece, created from oil, wire, foil and dust on two glass panels, depicts the haphazard progress of "an encounter between the Bride in the upper panel, and her nine 'Bachelors', gathered timidly below amidst a wealth of mysterious mechanical apparatus".¹

This is a neat metaphor. Duchamp demonstrates that all too often women are left waiting while men attempt to sort through the myriad foreign apparatus that separate them. Fittingly, it is the artwork Australian author Nikki Gemmell refers to in the title of her most recent novel, *The Bride Stripped Bare* (HarperCollins Australia, 2003). Thematically, the novel relates well to Duchamp's vision of sexual politics. A central concern is the difficulty experienced by men and women relating to and communicating with each other. More interestingly, there are also parallels between the history and events surrounding the release of the artwork and the novel.

The Bride Stripped Bare was introduced to the world in October 2002 under the deliberately ambiguous name, 'Anonymous'. Marketed as "an explosive novel of sex, secrecy and escape",² it was touted as the work of an average London housewife, depressed and bored within the confines of her oppressive existence.

At least, that's what agent David Goodwin was telling everyone at the Frankfurt Book Fair: that the book had been sent to him anonymously. This was designed to send the Book Fair into a spin, and it did just that. By the fair's end, the *Daily Mail* was describing it as "the publishing sensation of the year".³ But the ensuing flurry of anticipation and mystery was ruined almost from the outset by the revelation that the novel had been written by ex-pat Australian author Nikki Gemmell. An established author, Gemmell was hardly the epitome of the bored housewife; and upon the book's release, Gemmell distanced herself from its content, initially denying her authorship and later expressing surprise at the fuss this created.

How was Gemmell exposed as the author? Reports vary—Gemmell herself claimed she had been outed by someone from within her publisher. Others speculated that the whole thing was an elaborate publisher ploy to generate interest. This is not entirely the truth because Gemmell in fact exposed herself. Back in September 2001, she did an interview with the *Australian's* Murray Waldren, where she not only described her next project as an honest account of sex and marriage, but also revealed the title of the novel. When Gemmell was reminded of this in a later interview with the *Australian*, she stated she had "completely forgotten giving such details to a journalist".⁴ She reiterated that her identity had been discovered by a British journalist who had relied on that most elusive of characters: the senior publishing source. Gemmell appears to be keeping with this version of events, later retelling it to Andrew Denton and other interviewers, and de-

scribing the experience as having been “unmasked very brutally by the British press”.⁵

This conscious creation of the ‘author self’ is not new, having been pioneered by Walt Whitman and Mark Twain to great effect. As with these authors, Gemmell effectively becomes the “author-commodity [wherein] . . . the author’s work and life [are] inextricably linked”.⁶ This has worked, with the hype surrounding *The Bride Stripped Bare* and very decent sales continuing.

The novel’s main claim to fame was its notoriety. From its inception it was promoted in terms of its perceived bravery, honesty and no-holds-barred approach to its subject matter: sex and marriage and what women are really thinking about, or in this case cringing about, in bed. Reviews were mixed. *The Bride Stripped Bare* is a polarising book: even when the brouhaha surrounding authorship (and therefore ownership) isn’t noted. One review “placed [the novel] at the intellectual and literary apex of chick lit”,⁷ while another described some of its sex scenes as “more error than Eros”.⁸

Every reviewer began by dealing with the issue of authorship and Gemmell’s exposure. Most then outlined the novel’s main theme: the apparent sexual liberation of a woman bound by the shackles of matrimony. It was generally agreed that the book offered food for thought, though how nourishing that food was, remained a source of contention.

A number of reviewers held that *The Bride Stripped Bare* is an unconvincing expression of modern feminist dogma. Michele Hewitson pointed out in the *New Zealand Herald* that “if the novel is supposed to be a portrait of a modern marriage it fails from the outset”. Deriding the novel’s “ugly depiction of a peculiarly old-fashioned marriage”, Hewitson also found herself “wishing . . . the good wife would give up . . . sexual liaisons with strangers and get herself a divorce lawyer”, adding, “now that might be liberating”.⁹

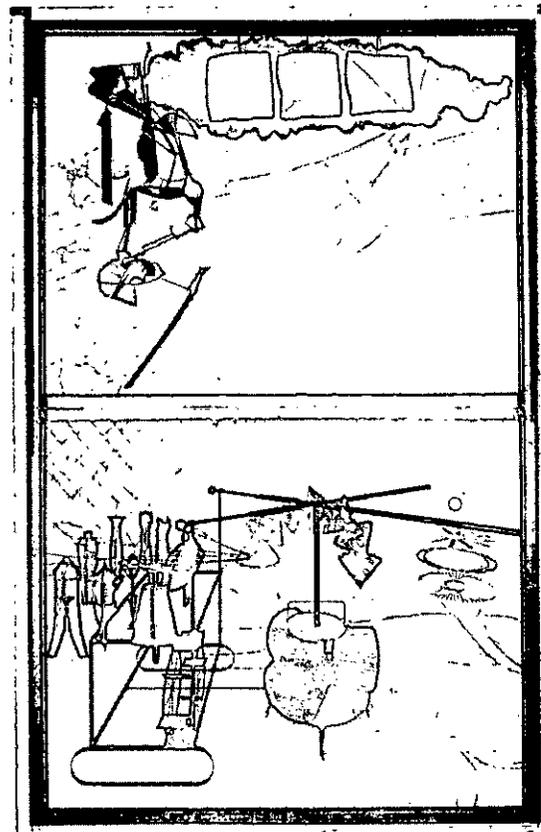
The negative response to the novel seems influenced by the reading of it as autobiography. Gemmell exacerbated this by promoting her book as if there were no apparent distinction between author and narrator, detailing how her feelings of marital dissatisfaction led her to write this novel, and how the novel has led to unresolved tension within her marriage. These ideas are expressed in interviews Gemmell gave and articles she wrote during a promotional visit to Australia.

An *Age* article describes Gemmell as “cheerful, direct, wildly outgoing and much, much too loud”. This, we are told, is “every Brit’s image of the expatriate Australian”.¹⁰ The interesting detail about this interview is the accompanying photograph. Gemmell is photographed in a faintly sexual pose, baring arms, legs and a hint of cleavage, smiling and relaxed. This looks like the sort of pose an agent would devise to ensure the headline: ‘The Author Stripped Bare’.

The image is one of a carefree and happy author, the very picture of success and contentment. But behind the giggly exterior lies the truth. Journalist Stephanie Bunbury notes that Gemmell needed a glass of wine to carry out the mid-morning interview. Gemmell’s nervousness seems at odds with the image she is attempting to project. While the author is depicted as casual and carefree, the person is nervous and calling for Dutch courage. In any case, Gemmell is gritting her teeth and bearing it.

This is one of the themes of *The Bride Stripped Bare* and one Gemmell is keen to open up for de-

Marcel Duchamp (1915–23), *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*



bate and discussion. To expedite the process, she wrote an article for the London *Guardian* called 'What do women really want in bed?'. The opening paragraphs describe how Gemmell "can't stand giving blow jobs" but "for years [has] dutifully kneeled". Yet the article soon turns into another sort of publicity device, wherein Gemmell reveals at length her reasons for writing the novel and for her attempt at anonymity, which "gave me the freedom to voice, for the first time, exactly what I wanted when it came to sex. I found the freedom to vent all those doubts I had felt for so long." She goes on: "I wasn't sure though, that I wanted my husband to know of this. I'm seen as a good, sweet wife." It seems fairly evident from this account that Gemmell was deliberately blurring that line between author and subject and she reveals this explicitly in her conclusion: "I still have my husband to deal with. He has just read my book. We haven't made love since, because he is feeling raw and vulnerable." And Gemmell again claims: "[T]o this day my publishers, agent and myself don't know how [the media] found out".

These comments and inconsistencies need to be highlighted because with this article, Gemmell's complicity in the construction of her persona is complete. The author who had previously hidden away from journalists is now joining the fray, offering her own account of events, outlining her regrets and then offering up yet more private information. Gemmell concludes her confession with this statement: "I hope the book works; I hope honesty works. I don't know yet, it is too early. I'm not sure if our relationship can survive the spotlight of so much frankness."

Yet returning to Australia, Gemmell backs away from these statements. She describes the book as descriptive rather than factual; based on discussions with married girlfriends, and merely exploring some of the problems many married couples face. In the face of this turnaround, the knives really come out. *The Guardian* features an opinion piece stating the current obsession with celebrities' sex lives is overwhelming important dialogues about sexual relationships; particularly those that would usually be conducted within marriage. The author asserts that the publicity and controversy surrounding *The Bride Stripped Bare* completely undermined any serious discussion about its content. In Australia, Emma-Kate Symons details Gemmell's journey, describing not only how she had 'outed' herself in 2001 as the

author stripped bare



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author, but also how Gemmell has repeatedly restated her publishing-source conspiracy theories. The latest had her describing to Margaret Throsby how it felt to be "ferreted out by a newspaper journalist". Gemmell also burst into tears during a panel discussion on Phillip Adams's *Late Night Live*, when it was suggested that 'Anonymous' was "a very savvy marketing tactic". Calling Adams a cynic, Gemmell reportedly stormed off the show. Symons's title, "Anonymous" author stripped bare, is accurate. She delights in tearing strips off Gemmell. In the end Gemmell, again in tears, states that she "[has] obligations to her publishers".

This unmasking and Gemmell's distress is effectively concluded in an *Age* piece by Jason Steger that takes a far more sympathetic approach, describing how Gemmell had been "reduced to tears on ABC radio" and how her luggage had been lost on a domestic flight, "leaving her with only the clothes she had on". And what clothes they were. The photo accompanying the story shows a completely different Gemmell from the one depicted in London just one month earlier. This Gemmell hides behind black-framed glasses, with her hair pulled up behind her head in a schoolmarmish fashion. Her smile is no less a forced effort than before, perhaps even more so with the lack of teeth and sincerity. But the big difference here is the clothes and the pose.

For a bride stripped bare, a distinct lack of flesh is shown. Black turtleneck, black stockings, a shapeless lump of a skirt, a pose that's altogether geeky, or gawky, certainly awkward, and far more demure: apologetic even. She looks thinner, more fragile. Absent are the "great squeals and peals of laughter" from the first article.

Instead, here is a woman with her knees, mouth and hands clenched as firmly together as possible.

Gemmell is now the very epitome of the repressed married woman. Even the headline has come full circle. Where the benign and unemotional 'The Author Stripped Bare' suggested the stripping was controlled by Gemmell, the later headline sounds very much like Gemmell has been the victim of an unprovoked attack: 'Author Stripped Bare as Sex Novel Touches Raw Nerve'.¹¹

Gemmell's strategy has backfired and she's left a mere shell, describing to Andrew Denton the effects this episode has had on her home life, on her marriage and on the colour of her hair. Interestingly, back in the original *Age* interview, Gemmell describes her husband's reaction to the book's content, saying he was particularly intrigued with the descriptions of random sex with taxi drivers. She had responded: "That kind of stuff is surface. I don't want to say anything about private things." She might have saved herself the humiliation she felt at the hands of the media if she'd taken her own advice.

Gemmell's dilemma, it seems, was that the book was too successful. Given the intensive bidding war for publishing (manufactured primarily by her agent) and the resulting intrigue, the book created exactly the kind of discussion and debate it sought to. Therein lay another issue, one that Gemmell has sought to redress since *The Bride Stripped Bare* was first released. Readers and reviewers alike do not make the distinction between author and narrator. And why would they? As we have seen with *Forbidden Love* by Norma Khouri (Random House, 2003), this is an era when the distinction between author and subject barely exists, and it is in the best interest of the media-conscious author to take advantage of this situation. The celebrity author after all is the one who gets the book sales—an appearance or mention on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* can virtually create an overnight success story. (The day Toni Morrison appeared on Oprah promoting *Song of Solomon*, 16,070 extra copies of the novel were sold.)¹² That publicity is crucial, particularly for new writers. This is all part of the process of being what Joe Moran has termed the "star author".

In hindsight, Gemmell might well have managed the release of *The Bride Stripped Bare* better. She has failed to successfully negotiate debates surrounding issues of authorship. Foucault maintained that "literary anonymity is not tolerable" and this was never more true than in the case of Nikki Gemmell. She might have maintained a critical distance from her

Author stripped bare as sex novel touches raw nerve

By Peter...
Her book may be called *The Bride Stripped Bare*, but for Nikki Gemmell it is a case of the author stripped bare.

She originally wanted to publish her book under a pseudonym, but she was persuaded by her publisher to write under her own name.

The book, which is about the life of a woman who has a series of affairs, is now being described as the author's most explicit work.

Gemmell, 46, the London-based author, says she has never had a serious relationship since she was 18.

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described as a novel that Gemmell described it as a blend of fiction and non-fiction. She had not expected her husband to read it. "I was really shocked because I had a lot of sex in it," she said. "It's not very explicit, but it's not very explicit." She had wanted to write a novel about a woman who has a series of affairs, but she was persuaded by her publisher to write under her own name.

Age, 31 July 2003

subject matter, either by publishing under a different, less tempting pseudonym or by refusing to participate in publicity.

Gemmell's ploy, and that of her agents and publishers, was to capitalise on the phenomenon of the celebrity author, to maximise sales and interest in her novel. Initially this was sought by establishing an aura of secrecy around the authorship of the novel. When this 'failed', Gemmell became a participant, and crossed an invisible line distinguishing literary revelation and personal exhibitionism. Once that line was crossed it seems that going back was not an option, regardless of how much she desired a return to relative anonymity. Gemmell was sucked into a vortex of publicity where her only defence option was to claim victimisation. It is this role that Gemmell seems to have occupied most recently. Perhaps, consciously or otherwise, she sought to capitalise on the public's ambivalent, simultaneously fascinated and appalled relationship with celebrity. She displays glimpses of being quite aware of the general power of manipulation, recently commenting, "Women do battle, and exact their revenge, in much more complex, wily ways than men".¹³

It remains to be seen how *The Bride Stripped Bare* will be valued in ten years' time. Amid a storm of controversy, Bret Easton Ellis gave just one brief interview in 1990 before the release of *American*

Psycho,¹⁴ and then maintained complete silence for a year. In 1991 he conducted one interview with *Rolling Stone*, where he laughed off criticism, said that reviews meant nothing to him and that the novel had no autobiographical elements. In 1997 Ellis admitted the novel was autobiographical in parts and that he found the criticism hard to take. The next year he revealed that writing the novel coincided with a nervous breakdown and drug problem. But by 1999 literary critics were calling for this work to be added to the canon.

The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even, or 'The Glass' as Duchamp's work is known, draws people because of its "witty, intelligent and vastly liberating redefinition of what a work of art can be".¹⁵ If Gemmell had chosen to promote her novel more wisely, she might have enjoyed such praise. 'The Glass' was broken during its first exhibition and then repaired by the artist himself. Gemmell too may need to distance herself from the novel, and in the process repair perceptions of it.

1. Philadelphia Museum of Art, 'Modern and Contemporary Art', 1998, <www.philamuseum.org/collections/modern_contemporary/1952-98-1.shtml>.

2. Front cover blurb, Anonymous, *The Bride Stripped Bare*, Fourth Estate, London, 2003.
3. Stephanie Bunbury, 'The author stripped bare', *Age*, 28 June 2003.
4. Emma-Kate Symons, "'Anonymous" author stripped bare', *Australian*, 30 July 2003.
5. *Enough Rope with Andrew Denton*, ABC TV, 24 October 2003.
6. Joe Moran, *Star Authors*, University of Michigan Press, 2000, p.22.
7. Kathy Hunt, 'The Bride Stripped Bare', *Bulletin (Books)*, 13 August 2003.
8. Katharine England, 'Nikki Gemmell: The Bride Stripped Bare', *Advertiser*, 30 August 2003.
9. Michele Hewitson, 'Anonymous: The Bride Stripped Bare', *New Zealand Herald*, 18 August 2003.
10. Bunbury, *Age*, 2003.
11. Jason Steger, 'Author stripped bare as sex novel touches raw nerve', *Age*, 31 July 2003.
12. Paul Gray, 'Winfrey's Winners: Oprah recommends a book on TV and—bingo!—Her viewers turn it into an instant best seller', *Time* 148:25, 2 December 1996, p.84; Daisy Maryles, 'Behind the bestsellers', *Publishers Weekly* 244:9, 3 March 1997, p.18.
13. 'The Getting of Wisdom', *Age Good Weekend*, 10 January 2004, p.7.
14. Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*, Vintage, New York, 1991.
15. Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998.

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