

A PHOTOJOURNALIST'S TALE

Fiona McDougall

I've only been really scared three times in my life.

Firstly when I almost drowned off the coast of Burley Heads, Queensland after imbibing too much champagne during a matriculation celebration with my girlfriends in 1972.

Secondly in Mogadishu in 1992, whilst on assignment for *The New York Times*, when the U.S. Marines ordered all reporters and photographers to lay face down on the ground, while pointing AK 47's at our heads and yelling obscenities.

And finally at Samye Ling Monastery in Tibet in 1997, whilst documenting southern African Buddhists who were making a pilgrimage - I had severe altitude sickness and lay down under a tree for three days and saw myself in a coffin.

What took me to Somalia, Tibet and other parts of the world is part of a very long story that started 20 years ago – a story put together through sweat, joy, laughter, fear and tears.

Melbourne 1975 to 1983

The eldest of four children, I went to Loreto Convent in Toorak, Melbourne, then studied Graphic Art at Swinburne where I discovered photography, and very quickly my path became clear. After a stint in advertising, I followed my yearning for press photography – an opportunity to tell peoples stories, to be 'a fly on the wall', to expose the good and the bad. I was lucky enough to be hired by *The Age* – but spent almost two years in the darkroom helping other photographers all of whom were male, printing their images and putting up with their belching and swearing!

After many loud noises and showing of stories I shot in my own, the Photo Editor, Ray Blackburn put me onto the suburban beat and within two years in 1977 I was officially on *The Age*.

It was a great, although extremely challenging 6 years, confronting new situations daily, working a schedule that did nothing for ones social life and dealing with male attitudes. I won awards along the way and, I would like to think a lot of respect. But something was missing and in 1983, I was beginning to feel that I didn't fit into the Australian scene; I wasn't really relating to it, something was missing. And it wasn't a boyfriend!



Italy 1983 to 1989

I was granted one year's leave of absence to pursue my desire for colour photography and magazine work overseas. I had a passion for everything Italian (yes, you've heard it before!) and knew I had to base myself there. So, with one contact, some Italian phrases, a folio and sufficient funds for 6 months, I set off for Rome, deviating to Hong Kong and China on the way. Michael Nicholson, political cartoonist for *The Age*, had kindly supplied me with one contact in Rome, Christina Georgeff, who I believe has been called upon more times than she would have liked by Aussies looking for help! An Australian, she has been there for over 30 years and was very warm and helpful to me in those first very lonely months.

Christina did indeed help a lost Aussie in Rome – helping to set me up an 'apartamento' on the suburban outskirts of Rome. But from then I was on my own – it was scary, lonely but exciting; I worked very hard to make contacts and get a foot in the door to see photo editors. I hooked up with Desmond O'Grady, an Australian writer who has lived in Rome for most of his adult life and is a contributor to Australian newspapers, including *The Age*. We teamed up on many stories together for *The Age*, *Good Weekend* and others sometimes on speculation: Australian artist Justin O'Brien, fashion designer Carla Fendi's villa, an Australian Carmelite nunnery in Tuscany, Australian Cardinal Edward Cassidy at the Vatican in Rome, the Spoleto Festival including an interview with Carlo Menotti, the Director, Australian artist Geoffrey Smart. At the time, Spoleto was becoming a sister city to Melbourne and it was exciting to attend and cover so many cultural events; there were many Australian journalists there at the time.

I photographed the *alta moda* (expensive fashion!) for the Australian media, the cinema, and did a personal project on Australians in Italy: Janet Venn Brown, Jeffrey Smart and others. I was lucky enough to get to know and spend much time with the now deceased Australian artist, Justin O'Brien; in fact he kindly loaned his *apartamento* near the Vatican for my parents when they came to visit. A large rambling 1930's apartment with marble floors and tall ceilings. Photojournalism was opening up another whole world.

Six months down the line, I met an American in my Italian class: Jonathan - a writer from San Francisco who was on vacation. I'd never really had much contact with the US and certainly knew little about its culture. In August 1985 after too many hilarious conversations in English and *cappuccinos* in piazzas and a strong love for one another, we were married at my parents' house in Melbourne – with Jonathan's mother Chiquita flying out from Los Angeles. All of this was very new for my mother, sisters and girlfriends who had married local *blokes*. In fact, my parents were

quite dismayed when Jonathan didn't arrive at Tullamarine airport with me. There'd been a glitch in Rome – the naive American didn't think he needed a visa for Australia and was forced to come out a few days later.

There were lonely moments even being married in Rome – missing family mostly and friends. Calling back home was expensive at the time but there was one moment when I didn't think twice. In 1988, after discovering I was pregnant, I made a visit to the clinician for my sonogram. In Italian, he explained how difficult it was to locate the foetus. Finally, he burst out with: '*Ma Donna, ci sono due!*' or: 'My God, there are two'! I was having twins and needed to speak with my mother!

Feeling nervous about this pregnancy, wanting to be with my family and utilize the health insurance that was available, we returned to Melbourne Christmas 1988; it was too difficult doing photo assignments and I found a job temping as a receptionist.



Africa

Kenya 1989 to 1994

So here we are - an Australian married to an American with three-month-old dual nationality twins arriving in Nairobi to start a one-year consultancy for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). What a wonderful, challenging, disturbing and enriching five years. I dug in again, making contacts and doing the rounds with my folio. Assignments for *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *The Baltimore Sun*, United Nations publications, and The Ford Foundation followed. I even landed a job as a Director of Photography for the local daily newspaper, *The Nation* – the first woman, the first white woman and Australian to do so. I oversaw a staff of five male Kenyan photographers who had various levels of expertise but were a great bunch.

Stories about hot air balloons flying over Mt. Kenya, about one of the last old white hunters, Bunny Allen in his mansion on Lamu, an Islamic island off the Kenyan coast, about a young Dutch painter, Hans Seuren, living on the island of Pate near Mombassa. He had converted to Islam and was trying to marry a local girl. His work was dreamlike and beautiful and sold for high prices at Gallery Watatu in Nairobi. Gallery Director Ruth Schaffner was requested by Hans to give me a painting after the article came out. Two months later, I exhibited my own work at Gallery Watatu – large black and white portraits of people who had contributed to the development of Kenya.

Perhaps my greatest triumph was landing contract work with *The New York Times*. It's funny, because I had actually avoided contacting the Bureau Chief, Jane Perlez, an Australian also – thinking I wasn't good enough. When she rang needing a

stock photo and the Picture Editor, Nancy Buirski, at the time thought it was very good, I had an 'in'. From that point onwards, Jane and I coupled up as a team, covering many stories on the drought, internal conflict in Kenya and Mozambique, and most significantly, the civil unrest in Somalia in 1992. We were the first journalistic team to go in and reveal the devastation, the famine, the tragedy, the deaths, the landmines, mothers too weak to feed their babies, the Somali warlords, the futility. Our work was recognized by *The Times* who nominated both Jane and myself for the Pulitzer Prize in the Features section. '...*The Times* considered literally thousands of images, from the wires and other sources, and found most of them to be overly sentimental or patronizing. Fiona McDougall's work was truly a cut above, showing respect for the subject matter and a documentation of the subtleties. *The Times* was proud to publish and is proud to nominate it for the Pulitzer Prize in Feature Photography'. (Taken from the accolade by Nancy Lee, Director of Photography, 1993). I may actually have been the first Australian photographer to be nominated by *The New York Times*. In any case, neither of us won a Pulitzer, but for me it was a tremendous honour to have been recognized for my work.

All the while in the back of my head as I travelled across the back roads of Africa, to many different countries (there is always so much time to think) sometimes crawling over narrow bumpy roads with huge pot holes and hidden landmines, staying in run down guest houses with no water or electricity (didn't worry me as long as I had candles, but I needed the power to charge my equipment), as I saw the joy and the tragedy, and danger, I kept asking myself really what I was doing? I seemed to be getting further and further away from my roots. I had family and an apartment back in Melbourne, a rented house in Kenya, twins that I had left sometimes screaming at the front door with the African nannies, and a husband, as I drove off on assignments.

I had never felt so detached and lonely than while on assignment for the International Labor Organization (ILO), I found myself in a remote village deep in the Valley of a Thousand Hills in southern Tanzania. There were only three foreigners on this hilltop for thousands of miles: I, in my guesthouse with no electricity and the Iranian project manager and her husband in a nearby house. It was so lonely. At one point, I waited for hours to get a phone line in the one public phone box in town to call Jonathan in Nairobi before he took off for duty travel. The local mayor took pity on me and allowed me to try his phone – but at that point Jonathan had left the house. If it hadn't been for my short wave radio, which allowed me to hear the BBC all night, I would have been a wreck!

Being an Australian in Africa – was advantageous. We are very well liked by both black and white and my Australian passport allowed me entry into most countries. When there were too many visas for one spot, I switched to my British

passport which I procured years ago when those with great grandparents in the UK were allowed to apply.

Perhaps the biggest problem with being an expatriate – and perhaps more so in Africa - is the problem of being able to get out quickly when there is a tragedy back home. Dad rang August 1989. Mum was dying of cancer. She'd had it for about two years and we thought she was in remission, but it had returned with a vengeance and Dad said I should come home quickly. Not easy when you are living in East Africa and breastfeeding.

Anyway, I got there in time to spend some meaningful days and nights with Mum before she died in the early hours of August 16th. After all these years away, I felt fortunate to have returned in time to see my mother and subsequently be there in the middle of the sadness and grief, to be there for Dad and my siblings.

Zimbabwe 1995 to 1998

After our stint in Kenya, Jonathan was offered a three-year posting to manage a communications project for the same agency, FAO. We arrived on New Years Day, lucky enough to have already sourced one of the huge bungalow style houses in a leafy, shady neighbourhood. We camped out until our furniture and other belongings arrived one month later. Once again, after settling our boys Dominic and Raphael into The International School of Harare, I went looking for work. With not as many bureaus as Nairobi, there weren't a lot of choices. But I managed to work for UN agencies, The Kellogg Foundation and *The New York Times*, with an exhibition for a local non-governmental organization. Once again, I was drawn to the lives and culture of the local people – who it seems to me always offer so much despite the hardships they face. AIDS, the gay community, mining (a lot of work for BHP) were some of the assignments I shot.

But perhaps the most challenging and enthralling trip was travelling to Tibet, with 24 lay Buddhists from southern Africa who were making a pilgrimage. They allowed me to accompany them in order to record their trip and capture the local life. Once again, I found myself in a strange exotic country further removed from my roots and suffering badly from altitude sickness! But this sort of resolved itself a few years later, when I had an exhibition of colour photographs and a book published, *Tibetan Journal*. To be on the road and document people and their lives has truly given me a lot of satisfaction in my life and made me realize that that was why I had left Australia – although it wasn't apparent at the time.



San Francisco 1998 to present

I wonder now sometimes, who I am and where I really belong. My husband and I are partners in OneWorld Communications – a marketing, advertising and public relations company for non-profits and government agencies. Some of our clients include: The California Department of Fish and Game, helping them educate the public not to feed wild animals; The Deaf and Disabled Telecommunications Program for whom we help market free specialized telephones to the deaf and immobility impaired among others. It's a lot different from my days on the road – I am not shooting as much or travelling to developing countries, but I am learning and using different skills as Creative Production Director and my passion for photojournalism is still very much alive.

I feel as if I have come full circle: having been an expatriate for twenty years, I now long to return. But I am not sure what I would be returning to. How would I fit in? Sure I have made many visits home during my twenty years' absence – to get married, to give birth, to see my dying mother, to spend Christmas, to be with family and friends. Sometimes, my expectations have been too high – I thought my stories and experiences would be embraced, that others would be longing to hear of these wild exotic places and people. But people have their own lives and understandably, it is sometimes the strange and unknown is too much to deal with. I do know one thing – my sisters (possibly slightly envious!) never let me forget how lucky I have been to have brought up babies and never had to wash a nappy! Also because of our African staff, we didn't need to carry out the usual household chores.

I am sad about all the happy and sometimes more sombre occasions I have missed: weddings, births, christenings, deaths, and graduations. And perhaps, on a less important scale, all the Christmas and birthday celebrations. Christmas for my Australian family has always been a big deal and usually is a hot day; it took me awhile to get used to the more low-key American approach to this day with much lower temperatures and the emphasis more on Thanksgiving.

I am trying hard for my boys to feel connected to their roots and culture and their Australian family and to keep the connection going. I rebel against some of the American traditions: candy for Halloween, no dress code for school, lack of discipline in schools, easy access to guns.

I love the fact that I have known my family and friends and followed their lives through letters, phone calls and more recently, email; I have boxes of letters and cuttings in the basement accrued over 20 years.

I regret not having the vote either in Australia – or America (I have yet to get my citizenship) and hope that I will be reinstated to the voting register in Australia. There are too many issues to be passionate about.

I know I wouldn't trade anything for all my experiences, I certainly wouldn't have got the assignments or met the people I have had I stayed in Australia.

I don't think now that I 'belong in two places', I still hold my national and cultural identify very strongly. I love being Australian... I despair that I may have lost my twang and I hope that when and if I do return to live one day, I will not be a stranger in my own country.



Fiona McDougall, a photojournalist, has worked for the United Nations, international press agencies, TIME and Newsweek and newspapers such as The New York Times. She was the first female press photographer to be employed by The Age in Melbourne. In 1993 her work on Somalia was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography. She is now based in San Francisco with her American husband and their 14-year-old twin boys and is a managing partner in OneWorld Communications, which specializes in public relations, marketing and advertising for non-profits and government agencies.

