

BYRON SHIRE ECHO BOOK REVIEW No 2

Publisher: Penguin
Book Title: A Big Life
Author: Jenny Kee
Reviewer: Moya Sayer-Jones

As a high school student I used to catch the train into Sydney after school and head straight for Jenny Kee's shop, Flamingo Park in the Strand Arcade. I was a very straight suburban girl (who desperately wanted to be crooked!) and Jenny, with her cat eye spectacles, booming voice and bohemian attitude, seemed to me to be just THE grooviest gal in town. I remember nicking money from my Dad's bedside table to lay-by one of her koala knit cardies. (And probably nicked even more to pay it off!) Flamingo Park was edgy and arty. It fluttered with models and actors, people who radiated confidence. And for some reason everyone (except Kee) always seemed to have really long legs!

More than three decades on and Kee is still a household name. She's best known for her eccentricity - as a fashionista, an artist, an activist, a celebrity and of course, as an extremely gifted groupie. Kee bedded four of the 1960's hottest rock offerings: John Lennon, Eric Clapton, Keith Richards and Roger Daltry, before leaving groupiendom behind. (A tragic waste of talent!). She was by then, all of 21.

Jenny Kee writes about all of these public personas in A Big Life but one of the best things about this memoir is how much we learn about the other Jenny: mother, wife, daughter, lover, Buddhist and best girlfriend. At 410 pages there's more than enough stories and wondrous photographs to provide a compelling picture of this complex woman: fabulous and flawed, brilliant and beleaguered.

The first chapter about her family, her Chinese father and Australian mother is a revealing start. The portrait of Kee's Dad, an inscrutable Chinese businessman, is fantastic. We get a timely reminder of Australian racism during the years of our White Australia policy and the stage is set to begin to understand the wild child who is about to emerge.

"I discovered that boys liked me...It was a revelation. For the first time in my life I began to feel comfortable about my Chinese appearance....Boys, I learnt, found 'exotic' girls 'sexy'..."

As we follow Kee through the next forty five years: her years in swinging London, early affairs, innumerable friends from the hip list (incl Richard Neville, Vogue's Anna Piaggi, shoe meister Manolo Blahnik), her marriage to artist Michael Ramsden, her magical business/creative partnership with Linda Jackson, her survival of the Granville train crash with daughter Grace, her international successes (remember a pregnant Princess Di in one of her koala jumpers?), her work on the Sydney Olympics, her 11 year relationship with Danton Hughes, son of Robert Hughes, who

was 21 years younger than she was; Danton's struggle with depression and his suicide; her discovery of Buddhism, the death of her mother...as Kee's writes about all these things, it's not hard to work out where they got the idea for the title of this book. A Big Life it is.

Sprinkled throughout is Kee's amazing, detailed descriptions of what she was wearing for almost everything! Starting from when she was a child... "red and white checked Liberty lawns with hand-smocking"..

..to her Fourth Form Formal..

"white organza with huge mauve-pink cabbage roses..tight bodice, bell shaped skirt..scooped neckline...matching-fabric stiletto sling-backs"..

..to a dinner in Milan..

"I wore my Flamingo Park Collage coat, shocking-pink Thai-silk harem pants, turban and favourite Sex stilettos. I cinched the coat in super-tight at the waist with a pink Thai silk cummberrbund. Linda wore...."

And while it took a little while for me to settle into the rhythm of her story-telling and what seemed to be too much detail about people I didn't know (or even people I did), I soon let myself dive into this re-telling as though Jenny Kee was a girlfriend and this was Friday night.

Because one of things I most enjoyed about this book, is Kee's willingness to talk too much. Just like a girlfriend who invites you into her mistakes and obsessions, her poor judgment, her unwise infatuations and her triumphs, her brilliant drive and energy. The charm of this book is that despite the famous names that litter the pages and Kee's obvious pride in her celebrity relationships, it's still a very inclusive book. The girl, the real girl, is somehow, miraculously preserved.

This book offers an intriguing peek into a big life of a woman who has been brave enough to reveal the small and vulnerable as well.

A Big Life Jenny Kee (with Samantha Trenoweth) Penguin