

# “Head over heels in love”

Kathy  
LETTE

PHOTOGRAPHY by WILL HORNER  
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When recently single Kathy Lette met guitarist Brian O'Doherty she just had to “carpe the hell out of diem”. In a candid interview the couple talks to **Juliet Rieden** about finding love and laughter.

**K**athy Lette has a flick in her tail and whether it's down to the unquenchable passion of new love or the wonders of HRT I have yet to discover, but there's no question she's awash with pheromones. It's true, the comedic author and national glitter ball is always upbeat, but behind the smiles and pun-tastic quips, the past few years have been undeniably tough.

“It was horrible,” Kathy admits. After 28 years of marriage to human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson, Kathy found herself navigating single life in her 60s. When we last spoke in

2017 the high-profile Aussie couple was in the first throes of separation, unsure of what lay ahead but gingerly working their way towards divorce, which came through in 2019.

“I adored him passionately and he was the great love of my life, but we grew apart,” explains Kathy. “A lot of this was to do with the fact that he's a workaholic, mostly working pro bono. Geoff would be the first to agree with that! Basically, I suffered from subpoena-envy,” she smiles, cracking one of her trademark jokes.

“He's on the side of the angels but was so busy saving the world that

I just had to learn to fly solo, socially. I got so used to being a one-woman band that in the end we started ‘individuating’, as therapists say. That's where you live under the same roof but you lead your individual lives. A lot of people just carry on, but I didn't want to live like that.”

Kathy and Geoff shared a family home in north London and unpicking their marriage has proved logistically and emotionally gruelling.

“I instigated it and I think it takes a lot of courage for anyone to do that because dismantling our marriage was like turning a giant cruise ship. It's a massive, huge, traumatic, harrowing →

HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY ALLISON BOYLE





**“I would say having been married to two brilliant, alpha men, I’ve now got a beta male and beta is better.”**



undertaking, but I also knew it was the right thing to do.”

As she talks, Kathy’s intense love for Geoff is obvious, but she’s also pragmatic about life and love’s journey. Geoff was Kathy’s second husband. She was married to media executive Kim Williams for six years from 1983 and though a passionate and fiercely loyal partner, Kathy is wise enough to sense when it’s time to move on.

“I don’t see divorce as a failure; I just see it as a change, because we live so long now. From honeymoon to tomb can be 80 or so years. Geoff and I had grown out of each other and we wanted different things. We’d been together a long time and I think I changed ... I think women do change.

“Of course, I left school at 16. I always joke that the only examination I’ve ever passed is my cervical smear test,” she giggles. “But it’s true. I was always looking for Henry Higgins [the erudite phonetics teacher in George Bernard Shaw’s classic play *Pygmalion*]. I was always looking for a man who was like a teacher. A walking encyclopaedia. And of course, in Kim Williams I had that; with Geoffrey I had that. But you know, I’m 61 now. I don’t need their intellectual nurturing in that way. Hell, I’ve got three honorary doctorates! I kind of outgrew that role of being Eliza Doolittle. Even at the end of *Pygmalion*, Eliza Doolittle outgrows Henry.”

It’s an interesting analogy because with her early literary success with her debut – now iconic – novel *Puberty Blues* (Kathy was just 20 when it was published) and subsequent career as an incisive, best-selling comic author, Kathy is no slouch in the intellect stakes. Indeed, her sharp-witted, bawdy and fiercely feminist one-woman stage shows are packed from London to Basingstoke; Canberra to Wollongong. And career aside, I would posit that it is Kathy who has proved to be the smart one in matters of the heart.

She says the most important thing when you split is to salvage friendship which she has always achieved, staying close to both of her exes. “I really encourage my friends who

are divorcing to remember what you loved about them in the first place. That huge bond, especially if you’ve had children, is still there and it’s really important that you cling to that. Geoff and I definitely have. I love him. I love talking to him. I ring him often. We discuss the political scenario. We take the kids out. We’re probably getting on better now.”

### New love

We’re sitting in a restaurant a stone’s throw from Kathy’s Sydney apartment. Over the past years she has spent more and more time in Australia, partly to be close to her octogenarian mum and three sisters, and partly because this is still very much where she feels at home. She always comes over for an extended period during the Aussie summer, usually with son Jules, and those trips have become longer and longer. This year she’s here with another significant other – the new man in her life, Brian O’Doherty.

Kathy wasn’t expecting to find love again, and from her dancing eyes and constant smile it’s obvious she believes she’s hit the jackpot. Brian has just joined us, and like Kathy he’s walking on air. He’s handsome, funny, charming and his Northern Irish lilt germinates its own romance. He’s also a million miles from Kathy’s previous partners.

“I would say having been married to two brilliant alpha men, I’ve now got a beta male and beta is better because they love to shop and mop, cook and clean. Brian adores me. He doesn’t bore me and he does all my chores for me but is secure enough in his masculinity not to find that threatening,” says Kathy, breaking into a rhyming patter, which is part comedy but also based firmly in reality. “He’s a man’s man, good at DIY and hitting the cat burglar over the head with the bread board, but then whipping up a sonnet, a soufflé and a prelude. Men are always asking me what women want in bed. The answer is BREAKFAST! Is there anything more aphrodisiacal than a man in a cooking apron?”

Brian is already used to Kathy’s banter. “I leap over it,” he jibes,

quietly basking in the glory. He actually is a great cook and the pair immediately start jabbering about his culinary triumphs, dinner parties around at Kathy’s London place with the likes of former Monty Python Eric Idle dropping round. The one they’re reliving was supposed to be for eight but ended up with 26 people at the gathering. Brian made lasagne and an amazing fish curry and lots more besides and then afterwards “everyone got the guitars out and started jamming ... It went until 3am,” chirps Kathy proudly.

Brian is one of nine (including three sets of twins), raised in a two-up, two-down terrace in a close-knit Catholic family in Derry. He grew up with “extraordinary women” who protected their family during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. It was a terrible time that has left deep scars and also claimed the life of his brother, who died in a fire in London. With bombs and fighting going on outside, Brian retreated into music. His father was a jazz pianist, and all the family were innately musical, their childhood cloaked in music. Brian taught himself guitar and spent hours picking out tunes in his own little world. His talent was prodigious and organic and he quickly developed into a brilliant classical guitarist. He won a Belfast music festival competition and then went to the Royal Academy of Music in London.

Brian’s career has taken him all over the world, from Brazil to the US and Britain, and today he writes music for theatre productions. He has never married – “I just keep galloping,” jokes the 54-year-old – but he does have a 20-year-old son who now lives in Ireland and who Brian is close to.

It seems fitting that it was music that brought Brian and Kathy together, although their chance meeting was the stuff of soap opera. “It was almost like a Richard Curtis rom-com. For someone like me who’s an investigative satirist, it’s so mawkish and clingingly embarrassing,” Kathy winces. “He was playing Bach in the park, sitting under a tree. Hello! I heard this →

BRIAN WEARS SCOTCH & SODA SHIRT AND COUNTRY ROAD CHINOS.



“I was in the eye of a cyclone,” laughs Brian. “There’s only one Kathy!”



beautiful music, like a Pied Piper. I just listened to him for a while and then I got talking to him. You know when you meet someone and you just feel like you could talk to them forever ...”

Brian recalls he was deeply engrossed in his strumming. It was a warm day in London and he was in Regent’s Park, the nearest patch of green to his flat, practising for a performance. “I was playing quite virtuosic and demanding music at the time, and I think Kathy thought, ‘oh my God, this isn’t just the normal three chords here’. I was going a bit mad and it’s a wonder the guitar didn’t explode.”

Brian had no idea who Kathy was, despite her media profile. “That’s why it’s probably so organic,” he muses. When he found out, he says: “I was amazed that she was interested in me.”

They swapped numbers and Kathy says she couldn’t stop thinking about him. “I’d never met anyone so kind in my life,” she says. “The next day I found myself wanting to talk to him. I couldn’t believe I was calling straight away but I felt compelled.”

After so many years out of the dating scene Kathy says she felt “really weird” but also exhilarated. “It’s like being a teenager except with wrinkles instead of pimples,” she jokes. “It feels

Kathy’s meeting with Brian, who was playing Bach under a tree, was like a rom-com scene. Right: Son Jules gets on brilliantly with Brian. Below: Kathy with Geoffrey, who she still loves.



ridiculous because you also feel head over heels in love. And then there’s the heels over head bit, which is also good ... I don’t want to shock you!”

Kathy didn’t stop to think about what was happening, she just knew she wanted to be with Brian all the time. “We’ve got the same tastes in theatre and concerts and we met every day and had coffee and did the crossword, getting faster and faster at it – we both love words and wordplay – and we laughed our lips off,” Kathy says. “I threw him in the deep end because a lot of my life is very public and I was at first nights and premieres and taking Brian to meet all my friends.”

“I was in the eye of a cyclone,” laughs Brian. “There’s only one Kathy!” He is seven years younger than her. “He’s practically a toy boy,”

she boasts. “I think that’s a good gap. You want someone who’s got the same cultural references as you. And also you don’t want to be lying naked in bed next to someone who’s 30 years younger and

have to hold your stomach in all night.”

### Moving in

He moved in a year ago, and so far so good. Brian has his music room and when he’s not composing, he heads out to the shops to buy ingredients for whatever he’s cooking that night. “I smell these wafting aromas all afternoon of what he’s making for dinner,” coos Kathy.

For Brian it was, however, an adjustment that he’s still getting used

to. “I’m very minimal, really. I don’t have many material possessions. I’ve never been interested in them and I don’t care. That might come from growing up in the Troubles and thinking ‘keep it light so you can keep moving’. When I went to Kathy’s house, there’s stuff everywhere.”

It’s also a very busy house. Both Kathy’s children – actor Jules, 29, and Labour party press officer Georgie, 27 – are currently living at home and friends are always popping round. “We’ve got Jules and his girlfriend and Georgie with all her political friends, plus my friends from Australia staying.” At first, Brian confesses, “I thought, I’m going to have to build myself a Lego house out the back”. But now he’s used to it. “It is full on, there’s no doubt about that, but also Kathy is so colourful and there’s never a dull moment and I do find my own little space.”

Crucial to this new world order was Kathy’s son, Jules, who has Asperger’s. He’s an extraordinary man with a fierce intellect and is well known in the UK as a star of the hospital soap *Holby City*. But with his condition come significant challenges. “Autistic people hate change,” says Kathy. “Divorce rates with couples who have a child with disabilities are astronomically high; it does put a lot of extra burden on everyday life. I adore Jules and I will never cut the umbilical cord. He will be with me forever, so it’s great that Geoff and I are still really good friends and also now that Brian gets on brilliantly with him. He’s just naturally kind and sits with Jules. He has the patience to watch the same movie over and over with him, which autistic people like to do. Whereas I have the patience of a hyperactive bumblebee, always buzzing onto the next thing.”

When I talk to Brian about Jules his eyes light up. “He’s a fascinating character. He’s totally original, he’s quirky, he’s got a fantastic vocabulary and a different way of looking at the world. He’s a colourful guy in real terms. Of course, you don’t know what colour you’re going to get sometimes.” Brian is also aware of

the pressures on Kathy and is full of admiration for her. “I’ve seen Kathy under serious, serious stress. But she just pulls herself up.”

### Act two

For the past year Kathy has been working on her new book, aptly titled *Husband Replacement Therapy*. It’s pure fiction but certainly draws inspiration from her own life and especially her time of life. “I wanted to write a book about women’s second act because there’s no modern literature about the menopause, about what comes next, about how women are feeling at my age, so it was kind of unexplored territory.”

In real life Kathy, her former school principal mum and her three sisters are really close, but in her book Kathy explores an opposite scenario. “I wanted to have sisters who were not getting on because of their matriarch. My mother is wonderful so it was fun to write a mother who’s not, who’s like your mother-in-law. Just manipulative, scheming and cruel.

“It starts when it’s [protagonist] Ruby’s 50th birthday and she’s making her speech. But instead of the usual celebratory words, she tells everyone what she really thinks of them, including her mother, sisters, friends, her husband who she’s just found out is having an affair. And then at the end she says, ‘oh and by the way, I’ve got pancreatic cancer, terminal’ ... Cut to the next morning, she wakes up completely hungover and a letter is popped through the letterbox which says ‘Dear Ms Ryan, we’re so sorry we sent you that letter by mistake ...’ She doesn’t have cancer and now nobody’s talking to her. While she was drunk, she booked to take her two sisters on a cruise to patch up their relationship and she keeps pretending she’s got cancer so they’ll come with her.”

Kathy has been on cruises with her sisters and says she sourced some of her material from the women she met on board. Her fictional sisters are unhappily married in different ways “so it’s about husband replacement therapy,” she explains. “Are they going

to leave their husbands? For whom? Or change their husbands. It’s very topical, it speaks to women between 50 and 70 and is about all the issues we’re facing now: menopause, ageing, refusing to age gracefully, disgracefully. I always say growing old is compulsory but growing up is optional. You don’t have to grow up. I had so much fun writing it.”

Brian is now a big fan of Kathy’s books but her mother has never read them. “She’s not allowed to. It started with *Puberty Blues* because it was so raunchy and outrageous. I thought, it’s not really for her. So we made a pact. The books are all in her house but she has promised not to read them. I always said, ‘Mum, if I think you’re reading them I’m going to censor myself’.”

*Husband Replacement Therapy* is vintage Kathy – and not just because she’s now in her 60s. It’s also proof that you can beat the menopause blues. “I was always known as the enfant terrible. You can’t really carry that off at 60. But I call it sixty because I think for women it’s the best time of your life,” she says. “I’m a big supporter of HRT because it’s like hormonal rocket fuel. The idea of slowing down at 60 is insane. I think women come into their own because for the first time ever you’re no longer tethered to the kitchen and mostly the kids have left the nest. You’ve got at least 15 years to just put yourself first for a change. Women never do that.”

Kathy is living proof that life is what you make it, and as I look over at Brian who has been chuckling away at her monologue, I spot a mistiness in his eyes. “She’s a unique sort of genie – she literally loves life and has been an incredible influence on me ... for the good,” he says. **AWW**



**HUSBAND REPLACEMENT THERAPY BY KATHY LETTE, VINTAGE, IS ON SALE FROM APRIL 28.**

BRIAN WEARS TED BAKER SHIRT AND TROUSERS. PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILL HORNER. GETTY IMAGES. ALANA LANDSBERY/BAUERSYNDICATION.COM.AU. SHOT ON LOCATION AT FRANCA BRASSIERE, POTTS POINT, SYDNEY.