

Strength of mind

Longtime local Annabet Ousback explains writing a book about the traumatic upbringing she and her late brother experienced had been a cathartic exercise.

Story by Rosamund Burton

In *Red Herrings for Breakfast*, first time author Annabet Ousback has written about her brother, the internationally recognised chef Anders Ousback, and her growing up in the boatshed at Balmoral Beach in the 1950s with an overbearing, violent Swedish father and strict, emotionally distant mother.

Having lived in Newport for much of her life, and then in Northbridge, two years ago she returned to Balmoral Beach. The spacious art deco apartment she shares with her third husband Ken is immaculate and uncluttered, but also full of memories of her past. The paintings on the walls, the photographs and a collection of fine ceramic bowls made by her brother, brings alive the 70-year-old's captivating memoir.

In the hallway is a brightly coloured painting of then Scandia Boatshed at Balmoral. Her father stands at the top of the slipway, her mother and grandmother on the beach, and Annabet

and Anders are in a dinghy not far from the shore. But the idyllic childhood spent with the water lapping at the doorstep and mucking about in boats was peppered by their traumatic upbringing.

Despite living at the beach, Annabet rarely goes swimming, and believes it's because of the fear she felt when aged 10 and Anders only nine their mother woke them in the night, made them row to a moored boat, and insisted they dive for their father's precious pump, which she had borrowed without his permission and dropped. Terrified of his wrath, the mother made her two children dive numerous times into the inky dark water with the ever-present threat of sharks, until eventually utterly exhausted they managed to drag the pump up from the bottom.

Annabet had the idea to write about their childhood in 2002, and when she spoke to Anders about it, he said he had too, and suggested they wrote it together. Annabet started, but Anders never did

and two years later took his own life.

"I put it aside," Annabet explains, "and it took me a long time to go back to it. Then I found his journals, which I've scattered through the book, and I realized we were writing the book together." The book also became a tribute to Anders, a mentor to several of Australia's best chefs but who at the end of his life ran into debt, and she hopes that the book helps people understand why he committed suicide.

"He was such an extraordinary person, such a talented person, but so tortured."

In 1964, the Ousbacks sold the boatshed and moved to Crescent Road in Newport.

"It was a horrible little house, an awful place. I hated it and still do," Annabet tells me. However, it was to be her home for many years. She attended Pittwater High School, failed her School Certificate after her father refused to give permission for her papers to be remarked, did a secretarial course and



married aged 21. In her 20s she had her daughter, Elin, and son, Anthony, before her shaky marriage ended, and she found herself, after 10 years of being independent, back living with her parents in her old bedroom and her children sharing her younger sister's old room.

It was then that her career in clothing design took off, when her neighbour suggested they both help a friend design clothing for a charity children's fashion parade at the Royal Motor Yacht Club in Newport. The range of cotton outfits Annabet made met with a standing ovation; every piece sold, and people were asking where her shop was. So, Annabet set about establishing one and in April 1981, Ginger & Minnie opened in Newport's Robertson Road.

The business did well, but Annabet's yardstick for success was that her clothes were sold in David Jones. She told one of the reps that she wanted to wholesale her clothes, so he took some samples to a couple of other shops, and was back within hours with a couple of large orders. Within a short period of time she had closed down Ginger & Minnie, moved to a warehouse in Narrabeen, and was making party dresses under the label, Annabet.

"I got into David Jones. There was an early January delivery and I had to sew all through Christmas."

It was the early 1980s and she steadily built up her business, despite her mother saying no when Annabet asked to borrow \$10,000 to buy fabric for a large

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A LIFETIME OF MEMORIES: Snapshots including son Anthony, daughter Elin and grandchildren Astrid and Christian; marrying Gary in 1972; an ad from *The Manly Daily* and an example of her popular children's clothing; the Balmoral Boathouse where she and brother Anders grew up; and cherished photos with Anders.



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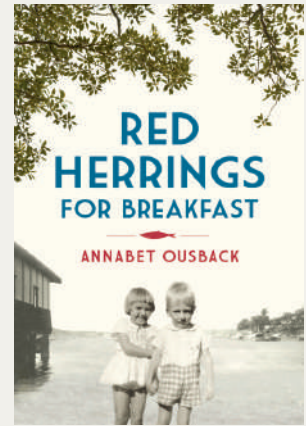
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order, guaranteeing that she would reimburse her, when the garments were delivered and she received payment. A family friend came to Annabet's rescue and lent her the money, but it was a bitter pill when she read her brother's journal after he died.

"I saw that Mum had lent him \$100,000. He paid her back \$10,000, and she told him to wipe the other \$90,000. She was hard on me. I think that's why I keep striving and having to prove myself," Annabet reflects.

By the early 1990s Annabet was making exquisite pure silk hand-embroidered dresses and David Jones offered her a section in the store solely for her designs. But concurrently her second husband, a businessman she married in 1996, was offered a NSW distributorship for orthopaedic implants.

"He said that we would do far better from his business than mine, and that I had to put mine on hold for six



* *Red Herrings for Breakfast* by Annabet Ousback is published by Bad Apple Press; RRP \$32.99.

months and help get his off the ground. Then he said I was an integral part of the business and he needed me." The couple were together for seven years and it was during the difficult divorce that she met her present husband, Ken. They had just moved in together, when Anders killed himself.

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She shows me a photograph of Anders and her at a Pittwater High reunion, which triggers a memory of another Pittwater High reunion 25 years ago.

"My history teacher Wally Wardell came up to me and said, 'Don't tell me, Annabet Ousback, you became a writer.'

'No,' I replied, 'Why?'
'Because of all my students you wrote the best history essay, and I always said that girl's going to be a writer.' I'd love to tell him I have become a writer and he was right."

An extract from *Red Herrings for Breakfast* ran across a double page spread in *Sunday Life* magazine; published in April, the book is in its second reprint. It's a triumph for an author, but especially a first-time one.

"I appreciate what I've achieved, but I'm always driven to try to achieve more. I think because we were always pushed as children and my self-confidence had a hammering. My brother was riddled with insecurities and I think that's what drove him

to suicide."

Annabet admits that she always wanted to move back to Balmoral, and fell in love with this apartment the moment she saw it. Annabet's life is a testament to overcoming her challenging childhood, and she talks joyfully about Elin and Anthony and her five grandchildren, the youngest of whom, Astrid, has just started at Queenwood School for Girls, the school at Balmoral where Annabet desperately wanted to go.

Red Herrings for Breakfast is a beautifully written, heart-wrenching story of the closeness of a brother and sister, their individual creative achievements and their emotional struggles due to their harsh upbringing.

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