

Talk of the table

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Sophie Cunningham wants her new-look *Meanjin* to read like "a really good dinner party conversation", writes Jane Sullivan.

ALTHOUGH SHE'S A Buddhist, Sophie Cunningham doesn't believe in reincarnation. Yet she's already lived many lives.

There are the professional and literary lives. A publishing whiz-kid in her 20s, working with big-name authors and putting new names on the map. An abrupt change in her mid-30s to fiction writer, producing two acclaimed novels, now working on a third. And in her 40s, a return to publishing at the helm of *Meanjin*, Australia's most revered literary journal.

Then there are the much-publicised personal lives. Three fathers (more of that later). A string of romances - good, bad and disastrous - with various men. And for the past eight years, a stable and happy relationship with her partner and best friend, Virginia Murdoch. But first, to business. To the business of editing *Meanjin*. "I want it to be lighter, more fun," she says. "But I don't mean lightweight."

We're sitting at Cunningham's dining table in the little Fitzroy terrace she shares with Murdoch, surrounded by bright furnishings, posters and ornaments from her travels in India. Every now and then she jumps up, fetches her laptop and shows me something from the September issue.

It's the first quarterly edition that is wholly her baby, and already the signs of change that showed up in the June edition are becoming much stronger. It looks entirely different. The design is simple and bold ("a slightly retro modernist look") with drawings reminiscent of 1960s cartoons. There's a newsy section very like the *The New Yorker's* Talk of the Town, and more colour. Instead of a unifying theme, there are articles on everything: football as a second language, bird-watching, a defence of the suburbs, the realisation that your son is autistic, the new technology and copyright, buying a leather jacket.

"I want each edition to feel like a really good dinner party conversation, with lots of different subjects that might come up," she says. "And I'm aiming to get younger readers on board." Her eagerness and confidence belie the troubled history behind her appointment. Last year, a war of words broke out between the then editor, Ian Britain, and the *Meanjin* board of management, in particular Louise Adler, chief executive of Melbourne University Publishing. The board voted in favour of MUP taking over the journal's administration and distribution and moving the *Meanjin* office into its building. (The journal and MUP are both subsidiaries of the University of Melbourne.)

Defenders of Britain attacked the decision as likely to destroy the magazine, or at least reduce it to an online ghost. It saddened many and surprised no one when Britain chose not to pursue another contract.

"No magazine of comparable weight or stature is shackled to a university," he said.

But Cunningham insists she doesn't feel the least bit shackled. "It's unrealistic to think you can have a journal that's totally independent. While I understand the principle that Ian was making, I suppose I'm a bit more of a pragmatist."

Age journalist James Button, an old friend, says Cunningham has qualities that will work well for her at *Meanjin*. "She has that rare ability - essential in a good publisher - to put aside ego and really get immersed in and thrilled by another person's work. She has a wide curiosity, and is interested in what young people are up to. She's also worldly: all those years in publishing houses and writing for newspapers have given her lots of smarts."

Michael Heyward, Cunningham's fiction publisher at Text Publishing, thinks she is "a really inspired" choice: "Someone who's a practising writer and has been a practising publisher,

that's exactly the right combination ... Having worked in commercial publishing, she will have the kind of thinking about publicity and marketing that becomes second nature, and that can be extraordinarily beneficial for a small magazine." As for *Meanjin's* troubled history, "she's well equipped to navigate those tricky routes".

Cunningham likes working in the MUP office: "It feels familiar, very comfortable. Everyone is incredibly busy and no one has time to stand over my shoulder. I've just been left alone to do my own thing."

She plans a regular feature on book design, she'll be interviewing authors herself, she'll be chasing up new names and promising unknowns, she'll run extracts from novels and graphic novels and "lots of essays about cultural life - I want people to write on what they are really passionate about".

It's going back to the approach of *Meanjin's* founder, Clem Christesen, she says: "A bit more eclectic, personal. It'll be a bit more hit and miss, but having a few more wild cards is good. It won't feel quite as academic: Ian published lots of fantastic people but it felt very highbrow and dense, even if it wasn't."

Among Cunningham's past contributions to *Meanjin* was an interview with her father, Peter Nicholls. They talked at length about science fiction (Nicholls is an expert). It's a respectful, informed and dispassionate discussion.

Nicholls walked out of Cunningham's life when she was five. He left her mother, Sari Wawn, and lived in the US. He kept in touch with letters and met his daughter briefly when she was 11, but otherwise they were separated for 20 years.

Now he's back in Australia and Cunningham knows him very well. When she was younger, she says, she worried about their separation. "My stepfather (her mother's second husband, John Cunningham) moved in when I was five and lived with us until I was 18, so I had a father figure, it wasn't that there was no man around.

"It's possible that absence had a kind of frisson, a meaning for my identity and for other people. I don't interpret absence as a lack of love." Cunningham's third father is her mother's third husband, Bernie McMahon, and she loves all three.

As she grew up, her ambition was to be a writer, and she began writing short stories. But all that fell by the wayside once she became a publisher. Her early experience working for Melbourne independent publishing pioneers Hilary McPhee and Diana Gribble led to a swift rise and a stellar career with Penguin, and later with Allen & Unwin. She gained a reputation for publishing innovative and daring books, both fiction and non-fiction: one of her discoveries was Mark Davis, author of the controversial cultural polemic *Gangland*.

Many were shocked at Cunningham's move away from 15 years in publishing. As much as anything else, it was jealousy that revived her early ambitions. "I went to endless writing festivals, hearing people talk about their writing. Then a friend rang me and said 'I've got the Paris studio' (an Australia Council-funded residency for writers). I was so overwhelmed with jealousy, I thought, 'If I'm jealous of writers, I've got to get out'."

Cunningham also believes that perhaps she doesn't have the temperament for publishing. "It's an extrovert's job, and I'm a bit of an introvert. I'm quite good at being extroverted in my professional life but I find it much harder talking about my own work."

That reluctance was put to a severe test when Cunningham's first novel, *Geography*, came out in 2004. It was about a somewhat deranged young woman madly in love with a sexy older man who is no good for her, and contained erotic scenes. Everyone assumed it was autobiography and everyone wanted to talk to her about the "real" story behind the novel.

While Cunningham admits that *Geography* was based on her own experience, it had also travelled a long way from that, she says. "I constructed a voice that was very personal and raw, an anxious distressed person trying to figure stuff out. It was a construct. But people wouldn't believe that, and still don't."

Perhaps it didn't help that in the past, Cunningham had often been confessional about her emotional life. She talked and wrote about yearning for unattainable men, and later about yearning for children.

But she does seem to have reached emotional equilibrium with Murdoch. If friends were surprised at their liaison, so was she.

"In my mid-30s I thought, 'Oh God, I just keep picking deadshits'. And then I met Virginia. We became good friends, and it probably hadn't occurred to me when I was younger to cross that line with a female relationship, even though I've always had amazing friendships with women.

"She's an extraordinary woman - incredibly smart, very special. She wasn't guided by romance the way I had been, but she could help me be romantic again."

Button says they are a great couple: "Virginia is very strong, poised, steady, directed, and those qualities have been good for Sophie, who had had less of a sense of direction before. Ginny is also a howling mad Geelong supporter and Sophie, who already followed Geelong but moderately, has been caught up in that madness."

Cunningham says it's too late now for her to be a biological mother - "I'm nearly 45, I've had endometriosis and I don't want to go to that level of IVF. Virginia could have kids, and we do talk about it - can we afford it? will it be legal? - but not in a wistful way."

If she used her own life as a starting point for *Geography* and then moved further into fiction, she's done the same thing with other people's lives in her next two books. *Bird*, published in July, is based on the life of a singer and actress who became a Buddhist nun. *This Devastating Fever*, which she's working on now, is based on the early life of Leonard Woolf: his years in Sri Lanka and his marriage to Virginia.

She doesn't know why she writes fiction about real people. "There are limitations, and I struggled with them in *Bird*. The novel really took off when I left those limitations behind." Her publisher, Michael Heyward, says Cunningham is "an extremely ambitious, restless writer" and *Bird* is a very ambitious novel, quite different from *Geography*. He is looking forward to seeing the Leonard Woolf book when she is ready.

Another grounding experience for Cunningham was her growing interest in Buddhism. She's written with comical wryness about her experience of the "boot camp" of Buddhist retreats, but says she's not a practising Buddhist. "I don't agree with everything about it and I don't do Buddhist things every day. For me it's more of a philosophy, about trying to find the best in yourself."

Her interest in Eastern spirituality has also led to an abiding fascination with India, Sri Lanka and Nepal. She's made many journeys in that part of the world and has written about it in essays and travel articles: "India is anarchic, which I like. I'm more comfortable there than in a more controlled environment. You never know what's going to happen next." It's a philosophy that might also apply to her life these days: "Following my instincts hasn't got me very far. You just have to stop thinking your life has a certain plan and see what happens."

She's very happy that *Meanjin* happened. "My only reservation is it will interfere with my writing time. But I'm hoping I will be a lot more focused in how I use it.

"In a perfect world, I wouldn't want to have a job. But I'm loving this job."

In its glory days, Michael Heyward says, *Meanjin* published the great fiction writers - White, Moorhouse, Carey - and anyone who aspired to greatness had to be published in its pages. Those days could still return: "Keep the history alive, and the history can renew itself. Sophie is in a really good position to be part of that quickening."

This story was found at:

<http://www.watoday.com.au/news/books/talk-of-the-table/2008/08/21/1219262404303.html?page=fullpage>