Adrienne's heart-to-heart

Adrienne Clarkson's candid yet guarded memoir, *Heart Matters*, is a study in contradictions. Exotic, almost mythical, it is a tale of immigration as compelling as the woman herself.

BY WENDY DENNIS

Adrienne Poy was nearly three years old when her life went into free fall. Until then, her family enjoyed all the accoutrements of a middle-class, colonial Hong Kong life. She lived with her parents, William and Ethel, and her six-year-old brother, Neville, in a gracious Broome Road duplex with a roof garden and fleet of servants. Her parents loved to go dancing at the Hong Kong Jockey Club, where her father was a gentleman jockey.

On Dec. 11, 1941, the Japanese invaded Hong Kong and the Poys' lives unravelled. The city was bombarded. Food was scarce. Their beloved borzoi, Snow White, returned home with human entrails in its mouth.

To avoid the occupying forces, the family shifted from basement to basement while Adrienne's father, a dispatch rider with the volunteer militia, rode his motorcycle under gunfire through the city. A bomb dropped near their hideout, and they saw a human "splatter against the wall like a bearskin." When Japanese soldiers came to the door looking for women to rape, Adrienne's grandmother hid the child's mother and aunt in the basement behind a closet wardrobe, where they huddled in terror.

Adrienne's father wrote letters to anyone who might help: an Indian acquaintance; Canadian trade commissioners who'd been friends and colleagues; other colourful Canadian characters the Poys had met socially who'd made Canada seem "raffish." No one replied.

One night the following June, six months into the occupation, there came a knock at the door. Terrified, >

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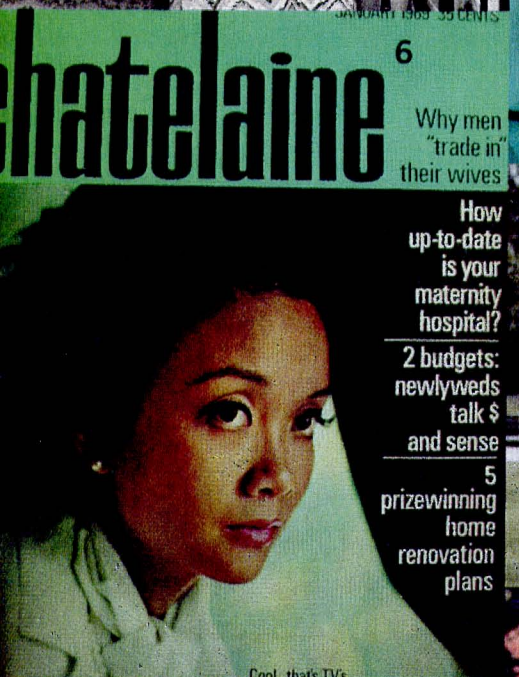
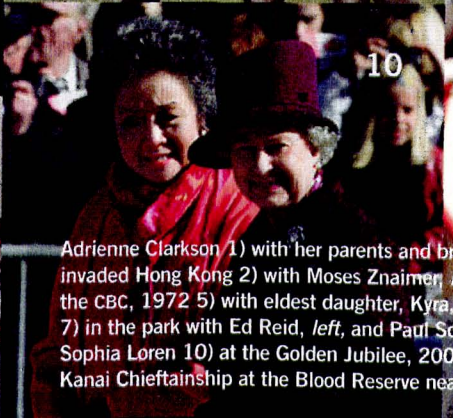
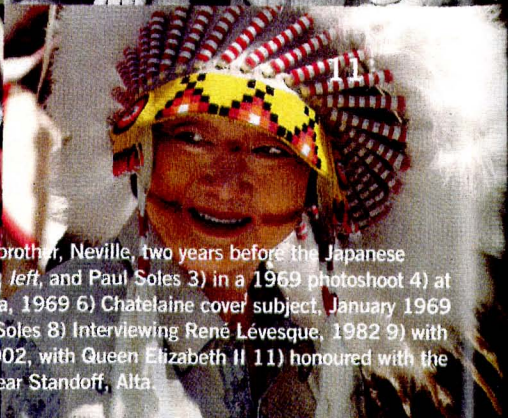
Adrienne Clarkson in a 1970s shot from her CBC program *Take Thirty.*







Adrienne Clarkson 1) with her parents and brother, Neville, two years before the Japanese invaded Hong Kong 2) with Moses Znaimer, *left*, and Paul Soles 3) in a 1969 photoshoot 4) at the CBC, 1972 5) with eldest daughter, Kyra, 1969 6) Chatelaine cover subject, January 1969 7) in the park with Ed Reid, *left*, and Paul Soles 8) Interviewing René Lévesque, 1982 9) with Sophia Loren 10) at the Golden Jubilee, 2002, with Queen Elizabeth II 11) honoured with the Kanai Chieftainship at the Blood Reserve near Standoff, Alta.

Adrienne's parents greeted an officer of the *Kempeitai,* the Japanese equivalent of the Gestapo, who told them their names were on a Red Cross prisoner-exchange list. They would set sail for Mozambique, where they'd be traded for Allied-held prisoners and put on a Red Cross ship bound for North America. They were to be at Stanley Dock at dawn carrying one suitcase each. They had 10 hours to make up their minds.

"I consider that night to have been the moment in our family's story that most created us," Clarkson writes in her subdued memoir, *Heart Matters* (Penguin). "It was my parents' ability to take that chance, to leap into that void, that gave us the second breath, the oxygen, we needed to live the rest of our lives."

SINCE ARRIVING IN CANADA in the summer of 1942 as a three-year-old child, Adrienne Clarkson has blazed like a comet through our national consciousness. She has been a television icon, a two-time novelist, the publisher of McClelland & Stewart (the country's most revered publishing house), served as a diplomat, and was the first immigrant to be Governor General.

Her life reverberates with so many amazing coincidences, gruelling hardships, blistering ironies, breathtaking miracles and fairy-tale endings, you'd swear the gods on Mount Olympus had decided to play Texas hold'em with her psyche just for something to do.

Check out this narrative arc: in August 1942, the Poy family arrives in Ottawa after a harrowing two-month journey through equatorial heat and relentless monsoons via Asia, Africa, South America and Jersey City, U.S.A., during which they travel part of the way in steerage, eat grub-infested oatmeal and narrowly escape having the country's door slammed in their faces because a Canadian official looks them over and says, "What are *these* people doing here? They're not white!" Eventually, Adrienne is carried off the boat by a young foreign-service officer named Arthur Menzies; fifty-eight years later, she inducted him into the Order of Canada for distinguished public service.

The family moves into a triplex with a coal furnace at 277 Sussex Dr., opposite the Canadian mint. Sundays, they ride the streetcar to Rockliffe Park past the gates of Rideau Hall. Fast-forward to Oct. 7, 1999: Clarkson is installed as Governor General, moves up the street to One Sussex Dr. (a.k.a. Rideau Hall) and is chauffeured to her new digs in a state landau.

You can't make this stuff up.

And yet, from the moment she landed in her adopted country, Clarkson's affecting tale is more than a rags-to-riches story. It's a story of race and assimilation and the ascendancy of feminism, with many moving lessons about grit, determination and never looking back. It moves us to ask why some children are psychically robust enough to transcend childhood traumas, while others lose their way. Most compellingly, it prompts us to wonder what strange alchemy of nature and nurture makes greatness and fashions a woman in full.

LESSON NUMBER ONE: if you want to raise an extraordinary daughter, look to the father. Clarkson appears to have adored her father, William, and it's not hard to see why. He was funny, stylish, dashing, absurdly handsome and larger than life in every way. The man rode steeplechase, for God's sake, drove a motorcycle, won the military medal for bravery during the Second World War. When he danced his wife around the floor at the Jockey Club, people applauded madly. Despite all he'd lost, he remained exuberantly hopeful. "Life," he said, "was for doing seriously, not taking seriously."

He also possessed an incredible work ethic. Born in Chiltern, New South Wales, Australia, William was only 11 years old when his father died. Afterwards, he was sent to live with relatives in Sydney and was dispatched to their basement. Undeterred, he scrabbled his way up by learning shorthand and typing, and taking elocution lessons to lose his Australian twang. He moved to Hong Kong, found a day job grinding leaves for a herbalist and moonlighted as a hotel clerk. To climb the social ladder, he morphed into a gentleman jockey, going to the track each morning for three hours before work. Six years after landing in Canada (where he earned an M.A. at night school), his instinctive eye for quality led him to commission a photograph of himself by promising photographer Yousuf Karsh.

This extravagantly charismatic man later encouraged Adrienne to dream boldly and seek a higher education – a radical notion at a time when few Canadian-raised Chinese girls were being taught to imagine expansive futures. His life was a shining beacon to his daughter, his unreserved faith in her potential, the "best passport" to a world created by men.

It struck me, reading Clarkson's memoir, how little credit fathers get for influencing their daughters' lives. They're mostly vanished or banished and relegated to >

FROM LEFT: PENGUIN BOOKS. *HEART MATTERS*/CBC STILL PHOTO COLLECTION/TORONTO STAR/CP IMAGES/TORONTO STAR/PAUL ROCKETT/CBC STILL PHOTO COLLECTION/CP IMAGES/CBC STILL PHOTO COLLECTION/CORBIS IMAGES/CP IMAGES

"Clarkson's maternal relationship raises many questions about the collateral damage she suffered at her mother's hand."

holding the diaper bag. And yet, most of the stories and studies I've read echo her experience: behind an accomplished woman often stands a cheerleading father. It's something worth remembering in a culture that fetishizes motherhood and considers mothers the supreme parental influence.

ETHEL POY WOULD PROVE to be a more emotionally challenging parent.

Adrienne was eight years old when her mother attempted suicide. She and her brother found their mother lying at the foot of her bed draped in a silk dressing gown with hand-rolled scalloped edging. The experience left Clarkson with "a deeply rooted distrust" of her mother's ability to cope with her own life – let alone her daughter's.

Ethel was a hypercritical perfectionist given to violent mood swings. (Years later, Clarkson realized her mother had suffered from an untreated depression her whole life.) She loved her children, according to Clarkson, with an "almost frightening focus." Anxiety stoked her volcanic temper, so her daughter grew deft at avoiding subjects that might set her off.

Adrienne, front, with her brother, Neville, and neighbours, 1944.

Raised in a grand house in Kowloon, China, surrounded by servants and extended family, Ethel's life was defined by two significant events. One day as a young child, on a trip with her siblings to The Peak, her uncle pushed her out of the car so it could climb the hill – and he kept going. Hours later, he went home, realized she was missing, and returned to find her sitting terrified by the side of the road.

Later, when Ethel was 15, her father engaged in dishonest business dealings and fled to Shanghai, leaving his family behind with minimal resources. The sudden poverty left the young Ethel with a primal fear of losing status.

She remained bitter about the cards she'd been dealt and felt cheated to have married a man beneath her station, whom she felt did not love her. "Marry the man who loves you," she'd caution her daughter. "Don't marry the man you love." And yet, she had the soul of an artist; beneath her smouldering depression was a heart roiling with unexpressed passion.

No one emerges unscathed with a mother like that, and Clarkson's maternal relationship, which she describes as "probably the most complex relationship" of her life, raises many questions about the collateral damage she suffered at her mother's hand. One wonders how deeply the aftershocks affected the mothering of her own daughters, from whom she was estranged for years.

Only two pages of Clarkson's memoir are devoted to the estrangement from her daughters Kyra and Blaise (which occurred in the wake of her divorce from political science professor Stephen Clarkson, and which she somehow endured after she'd already lost Blaise's twin, Pascal, to sudden infant death syndrome). Her daughters (with whom she later reconciled) come across largely as faceless creatures – "extraordinary people with wonderful professions and great husbands."

Clarkson's need for privacy around this dark period is understandable. Still, in a memoir, I think we deserve at least some sense of how she made it through – particularly when divorce shatters so many parent-child relationships. How Clarkson assimilated the experience remains one of the great unanswered questions in the book.

No doubt her talent for adaptability helped. She learned to dodge her mother's ricocheting moods and muffle her critical voice, and developed a sixth sense about which parental messages to reject and absorb. Even as a child, Clarkson knew her mother's crazed admonitions not to trust anybody were unlikely to help her in life.

Her parents' insistence that she pick sides during their frequent quarrels left her with a "dull, hard fist" in her chest, contributed to her cultivating a certain protective emotional distance, and left her struggling to quell the feeling that she was obliged to manage others' >

PENGUIN BOOKS, *HEART MATTERS*

"Frankly, I found it a relief to have a head of state who knew her way around an Issey Miyake."

emotional equilibrium. The experience also helped forge that signature, steely reserve, a trait she capitalized on to great effect as a journalist.

And yet, despite their limitations, Clarkson saw her parents as visionaries. When they first arrived in Ottawa, a "cold little white place with white people," they had trouble adapting to the city's lack of sophistication. But, for the Poys, Chinatown was never an option – geographically or spiritually. It was a state of mind for which they had little patience. Having spent their lives escaping the xenophobia of that world, they longed to assimilate. Clarkson's father felt "violently" that his family's English had to be perfect. Her mother – who'd never set foot in a kitchen before coming to Canada – warmed to French-Canadian families who taught her to cook and shop as a Canadian.

For their heroism in carrying on despite their trauma, their daughter never ceased to admire them. "They took the wreckage of the first lives they had created and tried to fit it into a completely new society. They never moaned about their losses. They seemed to have absorbed them and to have left them...only the stories remained."

With Doreen Coolen, mother of Private Richard Green, who was killed in Afghanistan, and former PM Jean Chrétien.

I HEARD ADRIENNE CLARKSON speak last February when Leonard Cohen was being inducted into the Canadian Songwriters' Hall of Fame. An unabashed fan, Clarkson delivered a blazingly articulate homage to Cohen that conveyed the hallowed place he occupies in our hearts. The speech moved me in a way that almost never happens: it made my reluctant patriot's heart swell with pride. Of Clarkson's talents, two struck me that evening: how adept she was at channelling the elusive essence of the Canadian soul; and how she must be the only head of state who could delivering a speech with such literary *gravitas*.

Clarkson didn't just raise the bar during her tenure as Governor General; she sent it catapulting skyward. She made Rideau Hall a showpiece for Canadiana, brought a heightened sense of occasion to our most visible ceremonies and travelled the globe as a gracious, formidably intelligent ambassador. Which is why, when she was attacked for her spending habits, it was a cringe-inducing national embarrassment. In a breathtakingly small-minded way, her critics envisioned a head of state in sensible shoes embodying the thrifty values of The Wealthy Barber.

The visceral animus toward Clarkson says far less about her than it does about us and the undercurrent of sexist, racist and classist prejudices in the Canadian psyche. It also speaks to the hypocrisy surrounding our smug notions of tolerance. Her daring dreams for her beloved country triggered another national affliction: our pathological need to cut down to size anybody perceived to be too grand – which apparently excludes anyone who's not a fan of *Corner Gas*. For all she gave us, *this* is how we chose to thank her? Frankly, I found it a relief to have a head of state who knew her way around an Issey Miyake.

Clarkson came to this country as an outsider, and she views it through an outsider's eye, a way that those of us born here cannot. Having had a love affair with her adopted country, she wanted to tell the world why she was so besotted. And it worked. Her rapturous valentines to the North – a place she fell in love with, visited often and believed held the secret to knowing Canada in the deepest way – certainly made me curious about what drew her there again and again.

Getting others to see us was easy, I suspect. The hard part was getting us to see ourselves. And yet, she accomplished that, too. More than any other public figure since Pierre Trudeau, Clarkson awakened our national pride. Where her country is concerned, she has never lost her three-year-old's sense of wonder, and that passionate enthusiasm has made us all want to look a little closer at what beguiled her so.

In the end, she gave us an impossibly audacious idea of ourselves, and it was one that we could never have imagined on our own. •

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