

# And they said it was no job for a woman ...

Former Brisbane lord mayor Sallyanne Atkinson has written her autobiography, and as ANGELA BENSTED discovers, she has an action-packed story to tell and a life peppered with “firsts”.

She juggles a croissant and a takeaway coffee as she ushers me into her South Brisbane apartment, waving at books and magazines piled neatly on a low table and apologising for a mess that doesn't exist.

It's early, and the 74-year-old is fresh from the ABC studios, with more interviews scheduled before a VIP event that evening.

Sallyanne is on the move again, this time promoting her autobiography *No Job for a Woman*.

It's a story with remarkable detail from a woman who's never kept a diary.

“I'm a hoarder,” she says. “I wouldn't even dare to show you my garage. I have boxes of files and cuttings.”

While most readers will remember her as lord mayor from 1985 to 1991 and her involvement with Australia's various Olympic Games bids, others might recall a pregnant



Sallyanne with the Duke of Edinburgh.

Sallyanne on TV's *Beauty and the Beast* during the late 1960s.

Sallyanne, a journalist before all else, is a storyteller.

A wartime child whose early life played out in colonial Sri Lanka, Sydney and Southport, her autobiography is peppered with earthy anecdotes.

There are nursing nuns who smoke and drink beer by the

bedside. There are council meetings departed early to make it to the butcher before 5pm.

There are gifts of “Brisbane 92” – wrapped toilet paper for International Olympic Committee delegates holed up in a grim East Berlin hotel.

Her gift of the gab is evident in every chapter.

Sallyanne fell into journalism at Brisbane's *Telegraph* in 1960 when there were five editions a day and women only worked in *Women's News* or on otherwise “suitable” assignments.

The vocation honed her people skills and later offered a lifeline to the young mother living in Edinburgh in the late 1960s while her husband completed his surgical training.

It also served her well in politics.

“It was a huge advantage knowing all the press,” she says.

“That's why I got good media.

“I used to go up to *The Courier Mail* at about eight o'clock at night – it was all pretty quiet up there – and go into the library and get my picture file and steal the bad ones and tear them up,” she says.

Together with her husband, Sallyanne joined the Liberal Party not long after the family

returned to Australia in 1970, and she later joined federal member James Killen's staff as a research assistant.

But she says she was always more interested in people than politics.

She credits her involvement



Brisbane's first female mayor.

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in local government to her insurance salesman father, a role she says involved caring for people and doing it personally.

"There's a great satisfaction in local government that the others don't get," she says.

"When you fix a pothole or make sure the bus comes on time, it's very satisfying."

This satisfaction went a long way to compensating for an unhappy marriage.

She married surgical trainee Leigh Atkinson in 1964 but they separated briefly during her time as lord mayor and eventually parted ways permanently in 1994.

"Leigh regarded my being in city hall as like tennis or bridge," she says. "I felt unloved in my marriage and unappreciated. "Looking back now I can understand it more," she says.

"Leigh was a neurosurgeon which is very draining. And he was a neurosurgeon at the Mater (where) aged nuns would rise to their feet and say 'yes doctor'.

"When I went into politics I never thought I'd be good enough for lord mayor but when I went in and started



Office with a view in Paris.

making speeches, people were appreciative," she says. "It was nice."

Sallyanne's story is peppered with firsts: first in her family to attend university, first female lord mayor of Brisbane and Australia's first female Senior Trade Commissioner in Europe.

She's rubbed shoulders with popes and royalty and navigated boardrooms with Australia's political, business and academic elite.

She's raised five children –

Nicola, Damien, Eloise, Genevieve and Stephanie – and revels in being a grandmother to 14 more.

But like many successful people, scratch the veneer and you find skeletons, tragedies, frailties and uncertainties.

Sallyanne endured the death of a child sibling and, years later, a grandchild.

She has struggled with depression, first as a new mother and more recently on turning 65.

She also writes of her painful disengagement with the Catholic church following "mediaeval" annulment proceedings.

But the most confronting memory is served up in the opening chapter.

When travelling with her family from Sri Lanka to Ireland on a troop ship after the war as a three-year-old, Sallyanne recalls being in a cabin with a naked man with jellybeans in her hand.

She later complained to her mother that he "hurt my bottom".

It's an unsettling story and one she hadn't shared with her

family before writing the book.

"It was never something I ever talked about. But just after I got married and knew what sex was I thought 'that's a very unusual thing for a girl to dream,'" she says.

She doesn't dwell on the episode, forgiving her parents' inaction given the times and their difficult family circumstances.

Sallyanne's practical nature is a recurring theme, like her decision to become a Catholic so she could marry in the church.

"It seemed to me for a Catholic the church is more important than it is for an Anglican," she says. "It was much easier for me to convert and it wasn't a big deal."

Later, Sallyanne adopted the same sanguine approach with the State Government, never objecting to minister Russ Hinze calling her "girlie" or "pet" for practical reasons.

"Taking offence at words would have been silly," she says.

Her grandfather first declared "that's no job for a woman" when he learned a young Sallyanne was working as a journalist.

It was an attitude which dogged her for many years.

"When I ran (for council) I was criticised for taking a job from a man," she says.

"My mother used to say 'your children will end up drug addicts or criminals'."

Today, as she glances across the river from her living room so close to the city she has championed across the globe for decades, she can almost lean out to give it a spit and polish, she shrugs and says "they seem to be very well adjusted".



**No Job For A Woman** by Sallyanne Atkinson, UQP, \$32.99

➤ Sallyanne is appearing at Riverbend Books, Bulimba, on Wednesday, November 23, at 6.30pm to speak about her memoir. Bookings [riverbendbooks.com.au/c/events](http://riverbendbooks.com.au/c/events) or 3899 8555.

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