

Columnist Barbara Kay launches new book

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Staff Reporter

Barbara Kay was clearly – and comfortably – in her element.

Surrounded by admirers, friends and family, the provocative *National Post* columnist spoke at the recent launch of her latest book, *Acknowledgements* (Freedom Press), in an unseasonably warm room in the McGill University Arts Building.

She welcomed guests, offered them some homemade eggplant dip, and then proceeded to give a typically direct and articulate account of how she came to develop her “small ‘c’ conservative” Weltanschauung.

The reception she received was as warm as the surroundings.

The collection of writings in her book has a subtitle: *A Cultural Memoir and Other Essays*, and consists of previously unpublished material.

Yet the essays contain the same basic ingredients that have made Kay – who began penning columns only a decade ago at about age 50 – both loved and loathed, but more often than not genuinely respected, even by ideological detractors.

Regardless of the issue – and it runs the gamut: pit bulls, pornography, abortion, political correctness, mistreatment of males, terrorism – Kay is never ambiguous (nor, for that matter, ambivalent), her opinions never muddled or weighed down by circumlocution.

Neither can she be pigeonholed. A vociferous opponent of anti-Zionism, which she describes as “a pathology of the left,” Kay still managed to make hairs bristle on the back of a few Jewish necks when she wrote a column critical of the “self-segregating” nature of chassidic Jews.

Last November, at a Ben-Gurion University conference in Israel on “desertification,” Kay was the only one present to publicly challenge a specially invited guest, Stanford University’s Paul Ehrlich, who, in his opening conference address, criticized Israel for being “overpopulated.”

Kay then sent in a column about it to her son, Jonathan, editorial page editor of the paper she works for, the quill of her pen still dripping.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A CULTURAL MEMOIR AND OTHER ESSAYS



She described Ehrlich as “a kind of grizzled, male version of Ann Coulter, but on the left,” who “favours the dual stylistic approach of apocalypticism and cheap personal attack.”

Columnist colleague George Jonas has offered this view of Kay: “She is a chippy polemicist, but only tells people that may disagree with her that they’re wrong, not that they’re small and stupid.”

“Most writers know how to assert, some know how to demonstrate, but only the Barbara Kays of columnists have the capacity to persuade.”

At McGill and in a subsequent email exchange with

The CJN, Kay was true to form, presenting a 10-reason “executive summary” of the 17,000-word “cultural memoir” that begins her book and explains how she “came to be” a conservative (as opposed to explaining “why” she was one, as the book launch blurb promised).

“The main reason I am a conservative – by which I mean a Canadian conservative with a small ‘c,’ which is also to say I am something of a classic liberal – is that I am quite old,” Kay explained to the gathered.

“In the formative years of my youth, everyone in my circle was what I would call a conservative now, but nobody called himself conservative then.”

Kay described how she grew up in a “cultural bubble of fiercely integrating, bourgeois, upwardly mobile second-generation Jews who were dazzled by their good fortune in having escaped the horrors of European history, and were determined to make the most of that good fortune through hard work, high-achieving offspring and model citizenship.

“Their ideology and mine was mainstream Jewish morality and our obsession with justice. Not social justice – just justice.”

Certainly, that sensibility and those values rubbed off on Kay and are reflected in *Acknowledgements* and in all of Kay’s writings.

In her email, Kay, a literature buff and teacher and a former president of the Jewish Public Library, explained how her background allowed her to eventually flourish as an observer and writer.

“I was lucky, I feel, in not having to work full time... Because I was mostly home, I had time to read, to think, to become involved in community service, to be with other young mothers as we socialize around our children’s activities...”

“I can say with certainty that had I begun my career in journalism in say, my 20s or 30s, I wouldn’t have much of interest to say...”

“It is because I spent so much time reading and observing and thinking in all the years I only worked part time, that I built up a kind of critical inventory of opinion-forming exposure to outstanding thinkers and writers, that I had the confidence to engage rhetorically when my late-life career opened up to me.”



THE POINTS DON'T MATTER

Colin Mochrie, one of the stars of the popular comedy television show, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* brings his improvisational skills to Toronto for a special fundraiser for the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company called *Whose Jewish Line Is It Anyway?* George Weston Recital Hall of the Toronto Centre for the Arts, May 28. For tickets call 416-932-9995 ext. 224. See full story on cjnews.com

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