

Feisty Florence James

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FLORENCE James, co-author with Dymphna Cusack of the once scandalous award-winning *Come In Spinner*, lives in a Sydney retirement village. In her little bunker, surrounded as she is by senior citizens and wheelchair-access walkways, her indignation is far from retired.

Given her time again, this 86-year-old would raise the roof over the same issues explored in the original edition of *Come In Spinner* — disarmament, sovereignty, women's right to control their fertility, equal pay for women, crime in high places.

Then, James and Cusack sent post-war Sydney into a spin and they may do so again with the publication by Angus and Robertson of an unabridged and extended edition (reviewed this page).

"By airing issues, we go forward," says James, grace personified, ferocity epitomised. "We are an American military colony so long as we have Pine Gap, which is not shared with Australia."

She chuckles with the satisfaction of one used to creating waves. "I've been involved in the peace movement since the 1950s. I was in the peace march last year. People's consciousness boils over and forces action."

On a recent trip to England, James visited the barbed wire fortifications of the United States base at Greenham Common: "I met a policeman there. He told me he had a brother living in Geraldton, neighbour to North-West Cape. I said to him: 'If there's a nuclear war, Geraldton will be one of the first places to go.' He had no idea," she says, with the sweetness of an old lady sinking an umbrella into a soft behind.

And if there were a Cusack-James team again? "We would write about the environment, racism, Pine Gap, women. We have a long way to go. It's still a society with a male powerbase."

James has more than a few male-inspired incendiaries on her hands, even if those hands were once daintily gloved.

After it won the 1946 Daily Telegraph novel competition to rave reviews from

BEHIND THE BOOK

By BERWYN LEWIS

the judges, the book was attacked by the same newspaper and the authors were instructed to cut offending passages.

Sales were assured — despite critics' attempts to suppress what was an embarrassing story. "Critics (wanted) to keep the rackets and the greed and the ugliness of wartime Sydney hidden beneath the good-time surface," James writes in the introduction to this new edition.

Events surrounding the production of *Come In Spinner* will have a familiar ring for some, even though almost half a century has passed. "At one time, the publishers wanted us to take out all the 'bloodys'. It was suggested that we should substitute 'ruddy'. Don't forget we were dominated by the English. Never would a 'ruddy' pass my lips — I know the difference between a 'ruddy' and a 'bloody'."

James acknowledges that some things are different these days — the definition of obscenity has changed; racy Australian idiom has penetrated academia; women writers have more than a foot through publishers' doors; there's more to Australian literature than tales of bush heroics; and "colonial" contracts for Australian authors are a thing of the past.

With their blockbuster, which sold more than 100,000 copies in its first edition, followed by translations into many languages, Cusack and James's "colonial contract" meant they shared a royalty of just 6d a copy on Australian sales.

The book is a reflection of the times: how World War II disrupted life, particularly for women who, having been recruited to fill men's jobs under the Manpower schemes, were sent back to the kitchen when the men returned

from the war.

"Then the pressure was on women to become baby breeders. A number of them realised that they were breeding sons to send to war. Only a few saw the future for themselves in terms of independence and individuality.

"During the war, women only earned 54 per cent of the male wage. Dymphna was a great fighter for equal pay for women teachers. I was fortunate. I had a man's job and a man's pay, editing a magazine for Royal Prince Alfred Hospital."

The atmosphere and characters of that period run through the book: "Everyone was gearing up for another depression, which didn't come. The older characters bring that out — Doss the barmaid and Bessie the powder-room attendant — they'll be on the scrapheap the moment the war stops. Younger women think they're immortal."

This Australian writer and former Fleet Street journalist, who interviewed people like writer Virginia Woolf, remembers that women in those days were restricted to reporting social functions. She refused to do this. And she still stands by her views. "I haven't changed my views on abortion," she says, adding that it's in no way an easy option.

"Women have the right to control their own fertility. They have a right to economic independence. Discrimination still flows beneath the surface."

In their search for an authentic voice, an authentic content, Cusack and James did not take the detached approach — they plunged into a world of brothels and two-up games.

"Some of the brothel scenes came about because we had a great friend who was an officer in the court. And the mayor of Katoomba, Tom Walford, taught us how to play two-up. And Dymphna was caretaking in a Kings Cross building where the rooms were used for one thing and another. She learned a lot," James says.

That she happened to be in an elevated social position also helped with the plotting of the book: "I was organising charity balls at the Hotel

Australia to raise funds to furnish the King George V Hospital."

She roars with laughter, relishing the memory of her first-hand knowledge of the connections between high society and crime. "I was dealing with wonderful people, the wives of honorary doctors, some of whom had reached a social status through their husbands.

"Doesn't that happen today? We have no idea who the drug trade fortunes are supporting. I see this now because I do a voluntary job at a Good Neighbourhood Centre where I see a lot of the local problems. The amount of good will and caring in the community is amazing. You never read about it in the newspaper because it's not news."

The magic of *Come In Spinner* is perhaps best summed up by a review at the time of its original publication. A Sunday Times (London) book reviewer, Michael Sadler, put it this way:

"To lose oneself in *Come In Spinner* is indeed a memorable and stirring experience. It has a pathos peculiar to itself, the heart-rending pathos of the hidden fears of women uprooted and lonely; fear of losing husband or lover, fear of beauty fading and age creeping on, fear of sliding back into squalor after the feverish period of sham prosperity if ever a new depression comes.

"This haunting dread of the future underlies the slangy cynicism with which the good time girls face a dangerous world."

Cusack and James have tasted these fears and challenged them: "Writers like Dymphna stood up to be counted," James says.

"She was enormously compassionate. Injustice and oppression aroused her indignation."

Messengers may change but the message is carried on — the latest vehicle is a television mini-series of *Come In Spinner* being produced by the ABC.

James believes it's important that this period of our history should be highlighted, but is adamant it should be authentically recreated.

"The limitations were so different to now," she says ... yet for some, the limitations, like an echo from the past, reverberate in the present.