

# BRIDGET SAUNDERS: GIRL ABOUTTOWN

Scandal, socialites and salacious gossip are all in a day's work for columnist Bridget Saunders. ZOE WALKER hangs out with the gossip guru at her Grey Lynn home.

It would be easy to simply write Bridget Saunders off as an empty-headed party girl. Her job as gossip columnist for the *Sunday Star Times* seems unequivocally glamorous – she mixes with rich-listers and celebrities, she knows all there is to know about those in Auckland's social scene, and she frequently gets invited to VIP parties. The name Bridget Saunders seems synonymous with scandal, celebrity and wealth. But Saunders insists that her life isn't as glitzy as it seems.

Her Grey Lynn villa certainly gives no indication of its high-profile occupant. With its overgrown front yard, Green Party sign on the gate and four or five dogs scurrying down the hallway, it looks more like the home of a dotty hippy than a gossip columnist. When I arrive, Jacqui Brown is there interviewing her. Saunders apologises later for not introducing me properly – “I get nervous,” she says.

Sitting barefoot on her vintage Victorian bed with her hands hovering over an old-fashioned heater, Saunders looks relaxed and welcoming. Her bedroom is a charming mishmash of fur rugs, antique lamps, and fresco paintings. She has been living here for three years and is slowly doing it up, something she is passionate about. *Harpers Bazaar* and *Vanity Fair* magazines are scattered in front of the fireplace, and her family of dogs saunter in and out of the room. Animals are another area that Saunders is passionate about, regularly attending animal rights demonstrations. She was a member of the animal rights group Auckland Animal Action, but was kicked out after members discovered she had a business making and designing clothes out of possum and vintage fur.

She is getting out of the business though, because, “I don't have the time and space; I've just had enough”.

Saunders is an articulate speaker. Mixed in with the prerequisite juicy (and off the record) anecdotes of naughty celebrities, she throws in stories of peace activists, the devastation in Sudan and her life in Papua New Guinea. I was expecting an arrogant bitch, but after a while it feels like I'm chatting with a girlfriend. Well, a girlfriend with an unbelievably exciting job of course.

Growing up in Devonport Saunders was a rebellious teenager who dropped out of Takapuna Grammar when she was 16. Not knowing what direction she wanted to head in, she applied for a journalism degree at the Auckland Institute of Technology, but was turned down. She discovered years later she was rejected because the lecturer thought she espoused feminist rhetoric. “But I only espoused feminist rhetoric because that's what I thought I ought to do to get into the course! I thought I should come across as a career girl.”

Saunders went to the University of Auckland and studied a Bachelor of English with a Masters in Psychology – “which is kind of perfect for a gossip columnist”.

Then she fell madly in love with her future ex-husband, and they moved to Papua New Guinea where they lived for 15 years. In 1994 two volcanic cones erupted, burying the town they were staying in. Even after losing everything in the eruption, her love of animals was obvious. “I thought God somebody's got to care, this is so terrible what's happened to the animals. People just left town and abandoned their animals, and they starved to death. It was terrible.”

Saunders was overwhelmed by the devastation that surrounded her, and wrote to a friend, describing what she explains as “being in the middle of hell”. The now defunct *More* magazine published these letters along with photos she took, and her writing career began.

When she was offered the job at the *Sunday Star Times* three years ago, she was uncertain whether to take it. “I thought ‘gossip columnist’ sounds so bad. It's sort of like a cross between a prison guard and a parking warden. It's seriously not a cool thing to say that you do!”

But she realised something like this hadn't been done in New Zealand before, and went for it. “It's the first time anyone's put their name and their face to it. I think that made it a lot harder in the beginning, but people know now and I don't think they're as scared of me as they were then.”

Once describing herself as a “gossip columnist with a conscience”, Saunders assures me that there are things she would never publish. She won't touch personal relationships when someone could get hurt. “I'd never want someone to find out that X's husband was doing the dirty on her from reading my column. I would be really ashamed of myself. You don't want to actually destroy lives.”

And she doesn't go near people's physical imperfections. “I don't think it's cool to talk about people's physical appearance. I mean, Kiwis are basically nice people. We just don't go there eh?” However, “people who are wankers or pretentious” are totally up for it, she says. She tells me about a celebrity with a do-gooder reputation, who uses her fame to dazzle little old ladies into giving her a better deal, meanwhile making lots of money.

She admits one of the worst things about her job is unintentionally hurting people's feelings. When she first began at the *Sunday Star Times*, she rubbed high-profile bar owner Leo Molloy up the wrong way by describing him as “Auckland's most loathed man”.

“I met him and I actually thought he was really cool. I thought he was going to think it was hilarious, but he didn't. He rang me up and said ‘I'm gonna fucking get you blah blah’. I was just devastated; I was in tears, I was hysterical.”

Surprisingly frank, Saunders is the first to admit that when it comes to her column, it's mostly about good looks. “We like pretty people. That's the truth,” she says, “Scandal and good looks, that's what it's all about.”

The scandal of recent weeks has been, of course, the celebrity drug bust. Saunders appears quite open-minded in regard to drugs, saying celebrity drug-taking is more common than most New Zealanders think. New Zealanders as a whole take massive amounts of drugs, she says, so why are we being such hypocrites? “There is drug-taking at very high levels and it doesn't seem to destroy lives at all. People still seem to hold down their high-powered, high-paying jobs. I think the biggest taboo is getting caught.”

Saunders seems slightly cynical about her unique position. She knows there is more to life than “the bullshit” as she calls it. “I'll come home from an event and turn on *BBC World*. I never saw one episode of *Sex and the City*.” She knows that fame is a fluke, a “combination of privilege and physical beauty” above anything else.

She tries hard to distance herself from the stereotype of a ditzy gossip columnist who isn't interested in the real issues. She recalls being at a “very ritzy, really boring dinner” during Fashion Week last year where she got talking to a black model from Sudan.

“Her story was incredible. She wouldn't tell me how her father was murdered because it was too terrible, but from being a child alone on the streets of Nairobi she ended up on the catwalks of New Zealand Fashion Week showing Sally Ridge's underwear.”

When I ask her what makes someone interesting,



**HOMEBOY:** Saunders at her Grey Lynn home with two of the five dogs she shares with a friend.

she makes a clear distinction between her personal life and the column. “For me personally I like people who've got values, and people who care about more than just having a good time and looking good.”

Even further distancing herself from any form of stereotype, she names journalist Cameron Bennett and peace activist Rachel Corrie as two people she admires. Saunders says she is “passionately political”, and jokingly says she should get into politics and run for the Green Party.

“Because I do care about bigger issues. I try to get them in under the radar. Because people are reading a gossip column, they don't expect to get anything that's got values or politics attached to it, but I do do it. Often under the radar is the most powerful way to get a message through.”

PHOTOS: CATHERINE WESTWOOD