

Sunday Life

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WHO NEEDS MANNERS?

THE NEW ETIQUETTE
SAYS WE ALL DO

THE HEAT IN
VINCE COLOSIMO

PINCH YOUR
PARTNER'S
HEALTH TIPS

HOW WOULD A BARONESS SET THE TABLE?

Good manners aren't about being posh or snooty, but rather about being kind and making people comfortable. The author of a new book on etiquette – and a real-life baroness – helps **RACHAEL OAKES-ASH** through the new social graces



THE DOYENNES OF SOCIETY IN Double Bay and Toorak wouldn't dream of asking the daughter of a boilermaker in Bankstown for tips on etiquette. But that would be etiquette faux pas number one on their part. After all, Sydney's Bankstown, 14 kilometres south-west of the city, has produced many illustrious Australians of fine etiquette. *That* Prime Minister with a penchant for Zegna suits and wandering hands oblivious to royal etiquette is one, and the daughter of a boilermaker, Marion von Adlerstein (inset), is another. Born plain old Marion Aylward, von Adlerstein is destined to become Australia's millennial Emily Post with the release of her *The Penguin Book Of Etiquette* next week.

When it comes to etiquette and social graces, I have always counted myself a perfect prefect. Well, apart from the time I allegedly

wiped my sticky, chicken-dripping fingers all over the hostess's tablecloth. And there was that time I asked for the "serviette" at a Brit's dinner party (this is seen as social treason and can have you dropped from the A-list to the Z-list before you can say "napkin", which is what I should have said in the first place).

When attending a house party, I always arrive with a gift, thank-you cards are sent within days of a social event, and flowers are dispatched when a baby is born. But this doesn't quell my sense of trepidation when I arrive five minutes late on the Sydney doorstep of Marion von Adlerstein's inner-city terrace, a narrow oasis with a manicured window garden tucked away in an equally narrow backstreet, safe in the almost fashionable suburb of Surry Hills. I had expected a waterside home with hired help to answer the door. Instead, I'm greeted by von Adlerstein herself and all etiquette ▷



goes out the window. "Pleased to meet you," I say and instantly recognise my mistake.

Page 121 *The Penguin Book Of Etiquette*
WHAT TO REPLY WHEN YOU
ARE INTRODUCED

A popular response is "hello" which should do in occasions other than strictly formal ones; some people say "hi" but that is too casual for anything other than the most informal occasion. It is permissible to say, "I'm delighted to meet you at last" but "Pleased to meet you" is a definite no-no.

She has the good grace not to notice and ushers me into her light-filled kitchen for a glass of "fruit infusion" on ice. There's something timeless about von Adlerstein. Her voice never quavers and it has the resonance of a 40-year-old's – 30 years her junior. While she's not English, I struggle to detect any Australian vowels. She's small, tiny even. Not dissimilar to Audrey Hepburn in frame and demeanour, with the posture of a ballerina. She sits tall with her hands by her sides as I lean my elbows on her kitchen dining table and slump my shoulders into my tape recorder. It's her first interview for her new book and I can't tell who is more nervous, her or me (or is that I?).

"Since writing this book, people have been watching my manners," says von Adlerstein. "When I tell them what I'm working on, they start to feel uncomfortable and then they watch me, especially around the dinner table. I am a bit awe-struck by it all. I think I'm a bit presumptuous to think I can tell people what to do."

Julie Gibbs, executive publisher at Penguin Books Australia, could not disagree more. Von Adlerstein was the perfect choice to write *The Penguin Book Of Etiquette* after her *Home Truths* and *The Vogue Guide To Good Form*. "If ever I want to know anything, I always ask Marion. She knows exactly the way to behave," says Gibbs. "She is a reference point. There is not one ounce of pretension about her, she makes you feel comfortable and is incredibly caring. I call her my guardian angel, she behaves honourably but she's not perfect!"

MARION AYLWARD WAS THE youngest of three children born to Ernest and Eileen. Her grandfather, from Suffolk in England, was Cambridge-educated and had a penchant for gambling. Lured by the Australian gold rush, he found himself in Gundagai broke and married with a baby son. Von Adlerstein's father left school at 12 when the family moved to the city. He had a

paper round in Newtown and eventually worked his way up to being a boilermaker. Her mother Eileen was born illegitimate and was raised by her grandmother until she was fostered out for most of her adolescent life. Ernest and Eileen met while "pirating up the Parramatta Road" on a Friday night. They married shortly after, with some resistance from Ernest's father who felt Eileen might be of an "inferior class".

Page 348 *The Penguin Book Of Etiquette*
GROWN-UP GRACES

One of the reasons etiquette seems a severe word is because it has so often been a means of separating people rather than bringing them together. It smacks of snobbery, a mark of the insecure, where differences in speech, dress and behaviour are used to classify people as "them" or "us". Such divisions do no credit to any society...

Von Adlerstein was given elocution lessons from the age of seven, which accounts for her timeless tones, then educated at Bankstown Public followed by a stint at Parramatta Domestic Science School (now Macarthur Girls High School) where she learned housekeeping, cookery, typing and shorthand. "There was a model house with a bathroom and kitchen and you learned how to clean them," says von Adlerstein, when describing the domestic life originally mapped out for her. "It was very *Upstairs Downstairs* and we were the downstairs."

Not content to clean other people's houses for a living, she left school at 15 and became a stenographer, which she hated. Answering an ad in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, von Adlerstein found herself working as a junior in the advertising department of a major retail store before marrying – she was 20 – and travelling to London to live and work with her first husband.

The marriage didn't last and, after seven years working as a creative for the London Press Exchange and Mather & Crowther, von Adlerstein returned to Australia, divorced. "We were married too young, it was too soon, I didn't have any measure of myself, didn't know what my capabilities were. I hadn't seen beyond marriage and children. I fell pregnant in London and was desperate to have the child, of course I miscarried because I was so anxious and I was devastated by it."

Back in Australia, von Adlerstein secured a job at J Walter Thompson working on the Kellogg's and Kimberly-Clark accounts. "Sydney was funny at the time, 1964, it was still strange to be a woman alone, especially a divorced woman, and I took to taking my

SILK SHIRT FROM SAINT TERESA. RINGS FROM ICEBERG



"We are definitely more ill-mannered than we used to be. It's a general relaxation of every aspect of our lives. In the city it's to do with overcrowding and frustration"

brother to parties. Women were very uncomfortable having me there without a partner, they would hold back and look after their husbands."

Some would say, for good reason. It was at JWT that she met Hans von Adlerstein, a German baron 22 years her senior and married. Von Adlerstein remembers a purely platonic, "wonderful working relationship". It wasn't until she arranged to be transferred to America for a stint with the JWT New York office that sparks flew. "When I told Hans, he was thunderstruck by it all and we started an affair. I thought, this is really stupid to get involved with a married man but instead of finishing it, it intensified."

Page 155 The Penguin Book Of Etiquette
MANNERS IN BUSINESS

Nobody wants to stand in the way of romance but do keep it outside work hours. If you enter into a liaison with someone who is already committed, particularly in marriage, you do so at considerable risk. Some of these unions end happily, some do not and when love turns bad, seeing the other party on a daily basis can be unbearable.

It is only fair to say that von Adlerstein's thoughts on relationship etiquette have somewhat changed since when she first met Hans. When I ask her if there is etiquette around having an affair with a married man, she replies, "Oh yes, it's an appalling thing to do. Here's how I justify it. I think you make a commitment to the person you are married to. I think if you have an affair with a married man, it's his responsibility in doing that, I don't think men are helpless creatures."

Men of today, however, while not helpless, are considered rude by von Adlerstein's standards. "Feminism has frightened men terribly, so instead of coping with it, they chuck manners out the window, too frightened to open the car door. I think some women are to blame for being offended at having a door opened for them. I love having a door opened for me, so long as it is not that patronising, putting down helpless thing."

Page 207 The Penguin Book Of Etiquette
LOOKING FOR LOVE

No matter who did the asking or who paid for the evening, the man should see to it that the woman gets home safely either by taking her there or, if that's not possible or reasonable, by seeing her into a taxi.

After a nine-month stint in the US, von Adlerstein returned to Australia and her beloved Hans who had since left his wife. She became Baroness (though only her friends call her this and always with tongue firmly planted in cheek) and a young girl from working-class Bankstown was linked to an aristocratic German line. "Titles are a dime a dozen in Germany, everyone's got one," says von Adlerstein in her self-deprecating manner. The wedding was encouraged by the advertising company they were both working for in Melbourne at the time. "The agency gave us the wedding; they thought, what happens if these two split up? We came to Sydney for a honeymoon at the Sebel Townhouse with a client and an account director!"

Von Adlerstein eventually gave up advertising and contributed to *Vogue* where she worked her way up to features editor and, in turn, travel director. "At some point you think, why don't I do what I really want. Editorial was more rewarding than advertising, though not financially!"

HER HOME IS FILLED WITH mementos of travel: colourful Ethiopian reliefs adorn her white walls, an armoire from Italy, a wardrobe from Bavaria and paintings of the Australian outback by her brother. The bathrooms have stacks of neatly folded hand towels in African-influenced baskets beside the basins, and the spare room is where she hangs her damask linen, pressed, hand rolled and starched blinding white. Photos of a handsome statuesque man and a pixie-like younger woman line the walls. It is the only open reminder that this house of a solo dweller once contained two (Hans died in 1987 of prostate cancer).

Everything has a place, a purpose, in her home. Far from minimalist, but there is no excess. Her bedroom is bright, breezy and white with a simple rack hanging her basic wardrobe of navy blues and blacks.

Page 183 *The Penguin Book Of Etiquette*
KEEPING UP
APPEARANCES

The principle of putting together a workable wardrobe is the same whether you are a man or a woman. You build it, piece by piece, in a calculated and disciplined way, based on what you



need to wear at work, at home and at play. That means choosing a colour scheme that suits you, and sticking with it, no matter what you buy.

"I turn to the ironing-board in times of crisis. I iron everything in the house," says von Adlerstein eyeing my shirt plucked straight from the washing basket. "My mother used to tell me all the family secrets over the ironing-board." She has had plenty of reason to turn to the ironing-board throughout what externally would seem like a charmed adult life. Her eldest sister committed suicide before von Adlerstein was 14. In 1977 she lost her father, in 1987 her husband, two years later her mother. Her beloved dog, Toro, died in 1990. She went to Venice, the city where she has willed her ashes to be scattered, for a year to recover. She calls the city her spiritual home. "I went to break the bad luck."

In 1994 the bad luck returned and the iron was switched back on when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. "I got such an awful fright, went to the doctor instantly and had a single mastectomy over Christmas. What was terrifying was, I had never been in hospital overnight before and I didn't know how the operation was going to affect me. What if I can't put out the garbage bins? I was thinking of everyday, ordinary things. Can I turn the mattress every week? When I'm stressed, I like to hand-roll the edges of linen, I took it in with me and the head nurse called it my meditation."

Page 73 *The Penguin Book Of Etiquette*
EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS

Never let someone close to you go into hospital alone. It is an alienating experience, no matter how comfortable the hospital and charming the staff. Not knowing what is to come physically can be terrifying. See your charge to his or her quarters and make sure that nothing is wanting before you leave.

It's fitting that in the later years of her life, von Adlerstein chose to write *The Penguin Book Of Etiquette* in a cradle-to-grave format, outlining the manners around the birth of a baby, primary school, high school (there's a chapter on teenagers, drugs and sex), coming of age, weddings, divorce, religious rituals (including funerals), the workforce as well as a chapter on overnight celebrity

and how to cope with it. She even spent time with Kylie Minogue's security guard in order to research how to behave in a mosh pit!

"Even when you are hysterical, there are still ways of behaving," says von Adlerstein. "You have to follow these codes or someone may get killed. This is when etiquette is imperative."

"We are definitely more ill-mannered than we used to be. It's a general relaxation of every aspect of our lives. In the city it's to do with overcrowding and frustration. People are anonymous. If you shop in the supermarket, you don't have to come face to face with anyone. The corner-shop mentality – knowing the name of the person who serves you – has gone out the window."

"Good manners is your intention to want to do well, and be kind to people," von Adlerstein assures me when I ask if good manners are still important. "Etiquette is the way you do it, it is the language and means of putting your good intentions into practice. Etiquette is about ritual, tribal comfort, making you feel secure within a group. I had question marks about 'Etiquette' at first; I wanted to call it 'Good Manners'. It's more of a life guide, really."

It took five years for von Adlerstein to finish this guide to life. She relied on friends, the Internet and good research to write about children (she and Hans never had children together). "I thought, there is no way I can deal with this and tell mums what to do with their children. I worried all the time." Now it's in print and about to go on the shelves and she's left worrying about the launch-party invitation. For a book of this nature, the invite must be just right or else she leaves herself open to public ridicule by those more obsessed with etiquette than good manners. I suggest she uses the family crest on the ring of her left hand to stamp the envelopes with wax, and get a favourable response. (I'm finally catching on to this etiquette business.)

As I leave, I notice the rim of my glass is covered in lipstick stains and von Adlerstein's is not. I envy her stillness and think those women of Double Bay and Toorak could learn a lot from the Baroness. Careful to leave a good impression, I bid the Baroness adieu and make a mental note to send a thankyou card in the post. That was a week ago and I have yet to put pen to paper. D'oh!

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The Penguin Book Of Etiquette: The Complete Australian Guide To Modern Manners by Marion von Adlerstein is published by Viking, \$49.95, and will be released on April 3.