

WEST WEEKEND

NOVEMBER 10-11 2018

ANNABEL
CRABB

Taking the pressure
down in the kitchen

MISSION
TO MARS

The Perth scientist
with a front-row seat

GOLDEN
YEARS

DON'T LET
AGE CRAMP
YOUR STYLE

Kimberley QUEEN

This Kununurra gem is
tougher than any diamond.

plus »

ROBERT
DREWE'S
CASE OF
DEJA VU


The Weekend West

feature

PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE

Diamond in THE ROUGH

Looking for a little perspective? **Julie Hosking** meets a real Kimberley jewel.



The November heat is relentless, sweat seeping from every pore almost as soon as we step outside. But there is no denying the harsh beauty of the landscape. The vast skies. The rich colours of the earth. The gorgeous gum standing sentry by the riverbank.

“See that tree,” Frauke Bolten-Boshammer says, as she dabs her face with a damp towel. “That’s where I found Friedrich.”

This serene spot is where she wandered one early morning before Christmas in 1984, to find her beloved husband lying peacefully, as if he had fallen asleep. He had shot himself.

Just three years after arriving in the Kimberley from Germany, Frauke was a widow. A widow left with four children, a mountain of debt, 1000ha on the edge of the Ord River that showed no sign of delivering on the dream that Friedrich had pulled them across the world to pursue – and no idea what to do next.

“Every waking minute since Friedrich’s death had been spent worrying about our future and what would become of us,” she writes in her memoir *A Diamond in the Dust*. “It would’ve been easy to pack our bags and head back but something in my heart was telling me that wasn’t the answer just yet.”

What her heart didn’t tell her, couldn’t possibly tell her, was that she would lose so much more in the years to come, more than any mother should have to bear. But she would also find many reasons to carry on. To follow new dreams. And build a future for her family.

Frauke is surrounded by memories of what she has lost. But she also knows, perhaps better than most, the value of what she has. And it’s got nothing to do with the enviable pink diamonds sparkling on her fingers.

FRAUKE (“LITTLE LADY”), THE THIRD CHILD TO JOHANNES and Liselotte Seemann, was born in October 1947 in a part of Germany that was so pretty it could have been ripped from the pages of a certain Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. But the little lady’s start to life was far from idyllic; Frauke was just two when her mother died of cancer, leaving her father bereft and his children starved of love as he retreated into himself. “He was very strict, too strict,” Frauke says. “But don’t forget he was in the war.”

The horrors of World War II may have scarred Johannes but his daughter believes the loss of his beloved Lotte broke him. The children barely spoke of her again because they knew it upset him too much. “It was like she never existed.”

Frauke was only six when she was put to work on the family farm, helping to bring in crops after school. In her memoir, she writes of fingers frozen to the bone as they pulled up potatoes so cold they were painful to hold. Her father was not a cruel man but he saw affection as a sign of weakness.

“To grow up without a mother, that’s horrible and my father couldn’t handle it well,” she says now. “He expected too much of us. But that made me ready for my life, I think.”

It also made her promise herself that if she ever had children they would be showered with love.

Like many young women in the 60s, Frauke studied home economics after school finished, learning the domestic duties required to run a household. Her apprenticeship took her to the Bolten family farm, where she would find her future husband.

A quiet man with big dreams and an entrepreneurial spirit, Friedrich was not one to settle for a predictable life in Germany. But while his young bride happily came along for a 10-month posting to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where he farmed cotton while she tended to the little ones, Fritz and Margret, she was not prepared for his next move.

The family, which now included the happy-go-lucky Peter, were ensconced on a 300ha farm surrounded by thick forest where the children could play outside all day, ride ponies and fish. Why on earth would they want to move to the other side of the world, to a dusty, hot outpost more than eight hours’ drive from the nearest town, a place where they knew no one and could barely speak the language?

But when Friedrich returned from a scouting trip to Western Australia, lured by stories of the Ord River irrigation scheme turning desert into fertile farming land, it was a fait accompli. “For the first time, Friedrich and I fought, really fought ... for weeks,” she writes. “How could he do this? Australia was such a long way from our home and our family, from all we’d worked to build, and I did not want to move there.”

While Frauke had accepted her traditional role, she was no pushover, so they came to a compromise: two years and then back to the family fold in Germany. It didn’t quite go to plan.

SITTING UNDER THE CATHEDRAL CEILING OF THE HOME she designed with an architect, surrounded by objects of beauty that reflect both her heritage (assorted European crockery) and her adopted country (a stunning Shane Pickett painting that runs the length of one wall, courtesy of Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia*), it’s hard to imagine the »



Love and loss
Frauke (right)
at home with
most of her
family around
her; Peter
(below left)
with older
brother Fritz six
months before
he died.



«state of the place Frauke walked into in the autumn of 1981. Suffice to say she wanted to get right back on that plane and return to Germany.

Run-down and filthy, the original home next door took her forever to clean properly, fighting a constant battle against the tide of red dirt, not to mention all the little bugs and not-so-little creatures that are part of the outback landscape. King brown snakes in the laundry. Crocodiles in the river. Everything was strange, nothing was as it should be.

Then there was Kununurra, a town not exactly overrun with amenities. “I couldn’t even find clothes here,” she recalls. “In Germany, they have these big catalogues and I thought I could just use one of those. But no, they weren’t here. We had lived in Africa but this was different. We never had weevils in the flour!”

If it was a culture shock for Frauke, the children adapted quickly, spending their days running wild outside, though school presented its challenges for the older ones, whose English was still very basic. Frauke’s heart bled for Margret when she learnt she’d been greeted with “heil Hitler” taunts: “The most horrible thing you could say to someone, especially an innocent little girl.”

As Friedrich toiled endlessly, all hours of the day and night, to turn the not-so-promised land around, Frauke began making a home, befriending neighbours and trying to adjust to the Australian way. She had no choice once her husband sold the farm in Germany to help reduce their mounting debts. Her lifeline, the promise of a return home was gone, a blow alleviated by the discovery she was pregnant with their fourth child, Maria. Peter, so much younger than his siblings, would have a little playmate.

Of all the family, this curly-haired, blue-eyed boy seemed to have found his natural habitat, frequently escaping on his own to explore, a practice he would continue as he grew older. Until one terrible January day, he never came back.

FAMILY IS EVERYTHING to Frauke. Everything. It’s why she came, however reluctantly, with her

Long journey
(above) Baby Frauke with her parents and siblings in Germany; the Kununurra farm after Friedrich’s hard work; on her wedding day to “my lovely Robert”.



husband to the other side of the world. Why she worked so hard to support him in a place she wasn’t sure she could ever love. It’s why, when Friedrich took his own life, after three years of setbacks and failed crops, she found the strength to pull herself out of a pit of despair: she had four children, the youngest only two, who needed her.

It’s why she made the painful decision to call her 15-year-old son, who was getting some farm experience in Germany at the time, to tell him the truth of his father’s death, rather than hide it. And why when her brother-in-law insisted she discourage Fritz from following in his father’s footsteps, she stood firm. “I told him ‘No, this is one who knows what he wants to do, let him do it and if it doesn’t work out, he can still do something else’,” she says, clearly proud that this boy hellbent on continuing his father’s legacy is now a 49-year-old farmer with every bit as much grit and tenacity.

Family is also the reason why, when she met a gentle man 11 years her junior, she knew she had struck gold. For Robert Boshammer fell not just for the single mother of four but her entire tribe. And they him.

“Everything Robert did was with the whole family in mind ... if he wanted to date me, he dated the whole family,” she writes. “Thankfully, that worked for us all, because he got just as much joy from the kids as they did from him.”

When the family became seven with the arrival of Katrina in 1990, the Bolten-Boshammers were complete. By then, Robert was running Oasis Farms



with Fritz not far behind, and Frauke had taken an unexpected turn into the jewellery industry, initially selling pieces from her back porch. In April 1991, she opened Kimberley Fine Diamonds in Kununurra. As the business grew, so did the nearby Argyle mine, uncovering rare pink diamonds that Frauke snapped up as often as finances would permit (she now believes she has one of the biggest collections of pinks in Australia). And then there were grandchildren to welcome. Holidays to take. After so many years of hard graft, the rewards were starting to roll in. As the new millennium dawned, life was undeniably good.

Robert and Frauke planned to welcome 2000 in style: with a trip to the Hopman Cup for tennis tragic Frauke – former player Alicia Molik, one of her heroes, models jewellery in a Kimberley Fine Diamonds’ glossy brochure – and then on to Noosa where the whole family would join them.

They were in Perth when they received the call that Monday morning. Peter was missing, as was his boat. He hadn’t shown for work and Fritz’s initial annoyance at his younger brother’s tardiness soon turned to concern when he learnt Peter never made it to the barbecue he was supposed to be attending on the Saturday. No one had seen him for 36 hours.

By the time Frauke and Robert arrived home, via Brisbane and Darwin, a search involving the SES, police and scores of volunteers was well under way. His brother-in-law spotted him from his helicopter, many hours later, floating in the river.

“When Friedrich died, something innate clicked on inside me: a survival instinct. I knew I had to keep going because I had children to look after,” she writes, tears falling with every word. “But this was my child, my flesh, my blood, my bones, my heart and my soul. It’s not the natural way of things for a child to die before a parent. I wanted to die too.”



THERE ARE FIVE BEAUTIFUL LITTLE handmade cups on a shelf just outside Frauke's kitchen, each engraved with one of her children's names and their birthdate. I am afraid to touch Peter's, in case I accidentally break something so precious.

His death hit this close family hard. It also shocked them. After many days of speculation, including that Peter may have been murdered or attacked by a rogue crocodile, the autopsy revealed the truth. A young man loved so much by so many, a healthy, seemingly happy 20-year-old, had weighed himself down with rocks and taken his own life. It was beyond comprehension and yet, sadly, Frauke was to discover, not uncommon.

"Really the main reason I agreed to the book was, I hope that somebody knows if somebody in the family has done it, it doesn't maybe need to be the father, maybe an uncle, the risk is higher that somebody else does it," she says. "I did not know that, or I would have talked more with Peter, because he was introverted, I would have talked more with him."

Frauke sighs, looking off into the distance. The family saw no signs of depression. "We still don't know why. No idea why. None. The week before he had gone with friends to Darwin for new year and he came back and said 'I had the time of my life'. We have asked ourselves a million times honestly, why, why, why."

But she will keep talking about it, just as the family is open about Robert's battle with depression, because she believes such issues have to be out in the open if we are to beat them. "If you can save just one family from going through this horrible thing, it is worth it."

Reading Frauke's memoir, I can't help but wonder how much one person can bear. How many times can you get knocked down and get back up again?

Frauke is in remission, after being diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma, stage four, in 2015. She stayed in Perth undergoing chemotherapy while family came and went for support, and her "second family" looked after the shop.

"It was hard but what can you do, you want to get better," the 71-year-old says with a shrug. "And I knew 100 per cent I would beat it. Because I'm so positive."

But how do you maintain that positivity when life constantly deals you such heavy doses of negativity?

Faith has sustained her, and family. And a great deal of fortitude. "You just have to. I love colours, I love life. I have to keep going, you know," she says. "If I would die tomorrow I would say still I had a good life because I was loved by my father, I got the right job, and education, I had two husbands who loved me, and we have wonderful kids. We lost Peter but I have a lot of grandkids and they are all wonderful, all of them – 11 grandkids, who has that!" She smiles, a smile so genuine it puts those sparkling gems to shame.

I POP INTO THE KIMBERLEY FINE DIAMONDS store on our last day in Kununurra. After spending the morning talking to Fritz Bolten for another story, I have renewed respect for the people who work up here, particularly the farmers. It's so hot I can almost feel myself melting as I walk into the showroom.

It is bright, spacious and blissfully cool. Frauke introduces me to a young couple who have brought her an orchid to say thank you. As I'm shown the pretty ring, a dainty diamond with a few flecks of pink around it, Frauke signs a copy of her book for them. They may not have a fraction of the budget of some of her clients – she's made pieces for many big names, including Hugh Jackman and Nicole Kidman while they were filming Australia in 2007 – but the newly engaged couple have clearly been made to feel a million dollars.

"I grew up very humble, very humble. And I am still myself. I will be myself. I will be on the ground. If you need to show what you have, blerghh," she says, making a delightful throwing-up sound. "No, no. That is not the way. I am still the same." **WW**

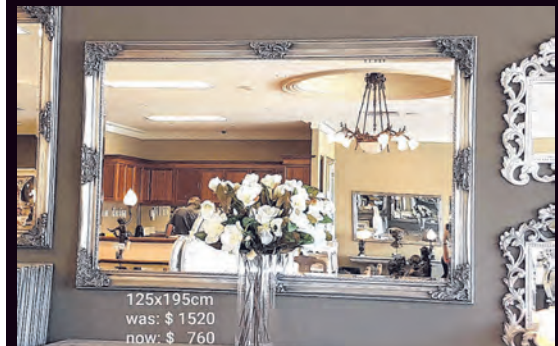


If you or anyone you know needs help, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or beyondblue 1300 224 636.

A Diamond in the Dust
Frauke Bolten-Boshammer, with Sue Smethurst
(Simon & Schuster, \$33)

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