

The Wise Woman's



MENDY PYLE

Joke

No one can blame British author and feminist Fay Weldon for reaping the rewards of a prolific literary career. But is she resting on her laurels? Kay Parris puts it to her.

Is Fay Weldon still a feminist Socialist? She's spent half her public life producing fearsome fictional treatises on the subject, a generous portion on newspaper polemics but the remaining time telling interviewers how separate are writers and their work.

Her outspoken support for author Salman Rushdie since his 'death sentence' for blasphemy from the late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, highlights Weldon's conviction that "a book is one thing, a writer another".

As a humanist she would no doubt have supported him 30 years ago when she began writing - *The Fat Woman's Joke*, her first published novel in 1967. In those days though, Fay identified herself plainly with the feminist philosophies she sought to convey. Now developments in sexual equality have caused her to "cheer up a bit" while maturity lends her a less dogmatic outlook. But she has an expectant market to feed.

Sweet-voiced and giggly to her guests, she must laugh loudest to herself as she dispatches her prolific wordage to the gullible chattering classes. An "anti-science" comment piece she wrote for *The Daily Telegraph* six months ago in the midst of Quantum/Hawking mania continues its repercussions around the English-speaking globe. Ex Pat sci-

tist Paul Davies used the *Sunday Age Melbourne* to condemn the "startling" vitriol of her "blistering attack". William Waldegrave, Minister for Science, took it all rather personally accusing Weldon of inciting a climate of "fear and loathing" against the business of his department.

"Don't expect us to act like scientists," the offending article warned. And Weldon wonders whether that's really what the fuss is all about. "It wasn't actually against science after all," she smiles innocently. "The people at *The Telegraph* just said that scientists are terribly worried because no one seems to like them, and could I perhaps write a piece explaining why".

Mocking her publishers for promoting her current book *Lifeforce* (HarperCollins 92) as "a novel about a man with a big cock" (10"), Weldon's more interested in the way it embodies a multitude of perspectives, none of which appear to be her own.

Overall it's pretty difficult to say what *Lifeforce* represents beyond a pretty good read. All the female characters in a circle of friends have slept with Leslie Beck behind his second wife's back, the story goes. She herself having ruthlessly supplanted his first. Then after disappearing from their lives for 20 years, he suddenly re-emerges to witness the climaxes of their various domestic problems.

The story is told through the eyes of one friend Nora, who tries, in turn, to convey other perspectives, her own continually intruding as she does so.

True to Weldon style, her women treat Beck as something of an inferior. But whilst their interest in the size of his member underlines his inadequacies in other departments, it also seems to reflect the survival of macho sex appeal in the Nineties.

Weldon is known to delight in shifting moral perspectives. Her celebrity status as a feminist campaigner could lead some to some accusations of philosophical contradiction.

"Lots of things in the novel aren't properly worked out," she observes without apology - why women who behave like the worst type of breed of

men should feel superior to a male stereotype? But then there's no reason why Weldon should apologise or explain.

She does express the view that all women, as all persons, are capable of betraying one another - indeed she purportedly lost her virginity to her best friend's boyfriend. But then not even *Life and Loves of a She-Devil* gave women the moral high ground as such. Meanwhile Weldon feels that lasting marriages are centering more on mutual dependence than female subservience, and that men are becoming "people first, gender conscious second".

Give her some seemingly sexist fodder, like Neil Lyndon's new *No More Sex - The Failure of Feminism* (published by Sinclair-Stevenson and inciting outrage amongst many) and she'll shoot it to the rooftops. But fundamentally, Weldon isn't very angry anymore.

At 61 she looks young and lovely, the better for hormone replacement therapy and something resembling inner peace. Paid to be strident, she's more into letting live. She brought her four sons up to be "free thinkers" and understands why two chose squatting and "the road" respectively. "Bring them up as people" she ponders "and they become unfit for employment because they can't bear other people regulating their lives".

As to life without a roof over your head, Weldon is saddened by the need for initiatives such as *The Big Issue*, but comments "Homelessness is already institutionalised once you give it a name. Once it becomes a social problem you've already lessened the impact of the human plight, but at least you can set in motion all the agencies who want to make the world a better place."

That's all very well, but hardly keeps a feminist socialist controversialist in full pay. She tries again.

"I think Fergie's a Murdoch sleeper, paid to bring down the Monarchy and get Mrs Thatcher into Buckingham Palace as President. I'd rather keep the Queen."