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SHE HAS BECOME ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL WOMEN OF HER GENERATION. AMY SCHUMER TELLS HANNAH JAMES HOW IT FEELS TO LEAD A NEW REVOLUTION

It's a rite of passage for any foreign celebrity reflecting on their time spent in Australia: the mandatory gushing over how much they enjoyed their visit. But when the celebrity is Amy Schumer - who is due to tour here nationally with her one-woman show in December - there's good reason to expect she might be a little more restrained.

Last year the actor and comedian came to Australia on a publicity blitz for *Trainwreck*, the largely autobiographical movie that she both wrote and starred in. Her back-to-back schedule resulted in several headline-making awkward exchanges with the media, including a polite but painfully stilted appearance on *The Weekly With Charlie Pickering* and a terse encounter with Kiis FM presenter Matt Tilley, who suggested her character in the film was “skanky”.

“I think the media had the idea that she would be funny all the time,” says Caroline Overington, associate editor of *The Australian*, who interviewed Schumer prior to the tour and believes many local journalists held unrealistic expectations of what a conversation with her would entail.

“They were trying to get her to play one gag after another,” is Overington's theory. “The mistake, I think, was to underestimate her sublime intelligence and the seriousness with which she takes her craft, and the many years of hard yards she's done, and just assume she's going to be the class clown.”

By the time the PR trip wrapped up, Schumer flew out of the country with a reputation for being “hard work”. But if she holds a grudge over being misunderstood, she's not letting on, and is quick to brush off any lingering concerns when *Stellar* asks about her seemingly bumpy time here. “I love Australia and I love Australians,” she declares enthusiastically. “You guys are the best at brunch anywhere I've ever been in my whole life.”

IN THE 12 MONTHS that have passed since then, her public persona largely remains intact. She's still a brassy Long Island blonde who jokes about her sex life on stage and drinks from a wineglass the size of a bucket on her sketch show, *Inside Amy Schumer*, which began in 2013.

Yet her most recent project, a book of personal essays titled *The Girl With The Lower Back Tattoo*, reveals a hitherto

hidden complexity. Fans have now learnt that Schumer, 35, is actually an introvert, has survived both rape and an abusive relationship, is an active campaigner for gun safety and enjoys being a devoted girlfriend.

Hers is the latest in a long line of autobiographies by comedians and actors - Tina Fey, Mindy Kaling, Lena Dunham, Chelsea Handler. And despite Schumer's stated belief her career hasn't been hampered by being a female in the male-dominated world of comedy (“I've only heard that from journalists. I worry it's being kept alive by that”), it's hard not to notice they're all women.

If there's something in our culture that requires soul-baring honesty from famous females, Schumer's happy to oblige. Her book includes stories that cast not only herself, but also her family, friends and lovers, in an unflattering light. She details two occasions on which her father loses control of his bowels when out in public with her, due to his multiple sclerosis. She also reveals how her mother, “manipulated me in unhealthy ways”. In person, she is blunter: “She brainwashed me. My brother and sister knew it for years.”

Yet even in her searing honesty, she's taken care to burn no bridges. “Anyone who is mentioned by their real name in the book, it was cleared with them and they read every word about them,” she tells *Stellar*. “Had either of them [her parents] said, ‘I don't want that in there,’ I would have understood. But they know it's part of what made me who I am, and they were down to share that.” So the book hasn't caused any family rifts? “It's brought us closer.”

Her parents, Sandy, a teacher for the deaf, and Gordon, a former furniture shop owner, gave Schumer, by her account, a rocky childhood. Comfortable circumstances in her early youth were followed by bankruptcy, her dad's MS diagnosis and her mother's affair with a family friend. Her mum's attempts to reassure Schumer, her brother Jason and sister Kim, that none of this had negative effects on the family led to Schumer's belief she was “brainwashed”. “I wish she could have just been honest with us. And with herself,” she writes.

Schumer's own career has been based on radical honesty. She occupies a unique place in pop culture, thanks to her onstage and TV sketches taking aim at everything from yeast infections to ▶

sexism. (Her “Last F*ckable Day” sketch, in which Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Tina Fey, and Patricia Arquette celebrate the last day an ageing Louis-Dreyfus can be considered attractive in Hollywood, has racked up 5.5 million views on YouTube.) Yet the revelations in her book, much of which were drawn from her teenage diaries, are more personal – and painful – than anything she’s shared before.

Two chapters she found particularly harrowing to write were the ones recounting an abusive relationship from her early 20s, which led to her boyfriend chasing her with a knife, and the loss of her virginity by rape. Shockingly, she says she had almost forgotten about the second event. “That was one of the things in my journal that I really hadn’t thought about in a long time. I revisited it thinking, ‘Wow, I had that so buried.’ There’s no way it didn’t have an effect on me.” Her abusive relationship was just as scarring: “That was so much pain and damage I didn’t realise was still a part of my nervous system. Revisiting that was really hard – and it isn’t over for me. I still think I have stuff to deal with from having been in that relationship,” she says.

So why dredge it all up? Why not write the light, bright, funny book her fans, not to mention her publishers, doubtless anticipated? “That’s a direction I’ve been pushed before when I’ve been thinking of writing a book,” she admits. “But it actually would have been harder for me to write a shiny package of a book: that’s not in me. Some of it was painful, but I don’t shy away from that.”

In fact, the pain was partly the point: “It was totally therapeutic and cathartic. It was a labour of love, and a lot of work. I came out of it feeling changed and better – about my relationships and myself and what my contribution is to people. I’m so glad I did it.”

Her contribution to society is something Schumer has been mulling over of late. Despite a mock-stern warning that her book contains “NO SELF-HELP INFO OR ADVICE”, she’s mindful of the impact her words can have. After describing her rape, she writes, “I’m opening up about my ‘first time’ because I don’t want it to happen to your daughter or sister or friend some day. I want to use my voice to tell people to make sure they have consent before they have sex with someone.”

And that’s not the only message she’s keen to get out. In July 2015, a gunman shot dead two women at a *Trainwreck* screening in the US. He had documented

mental-health problems and a history of violence, yet still legally bought a gun. Profoundly shocked, Schumer began campaigning with her second cousin once removed, Senator Chuck Schumer, for improved gun-safety laws. Her book ends with statistics about gun crime.

It’s all a long way from talking about her sex life onstage. “I’m learning more and more the influence I have,” says Schumer of becoming a public figure. “I think of how I’ve been influenced by people in the media, and I’ve come to terms with the fact that I’m one of those people now.” Does the responsibility of being a role model unnerve her? “I think people are in really good hands with me, because my intentions are good and hopefully egoless. I just like for people to feel better – I know that I felt so much better and supported when other women have shared their struggles.”

When Schumer herself shares, the world listens. Despite the perception her promotion of *Trainwreck* here lived up to its name, thousands of fans lined up outside cinemas for the chance to see the comic in the flesh. “At the time Amy had a small Australian fan base for her TV

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series, but the tour went on to lift her profile as a comedian and actor to the mass market,” says Suzanne Stretton-Brown, the marketing director of Universal Pictures Australia, who worked with Schumer on the tour. “The film’s performance at the Australian box office best demonstrates the incredible appeal she has with audiences.” That it grossed \$13.5 million here alone, means, as Stretton-Brown says, “We can expect to see a lot more of Amy Schumer.”

YET FAME HAS its downsides, too. She’s been accused of stealing jokes (the comics involved later retracted), being racist (she apologised), and, along with most women in the public eye, of being – well, everything. She neatly forestalled all possible praise and criticism of a semi-nude portrait of her that appeared in the 2016 Pirelli calendar by posting it on Instagram, captioned: “Beautiful, gross, strong, thin, fat, pretty, ugly, sexy, disgusting, flawless, woman.”

And of course there are the hecklers. The most recent incident, which occurred in Stockholm on Schumer’s



FUNNY LADY Amy Schumer onstage in New York; (below) with boyfriend Ben Hanisch.



ALL ABOUT AMY (clockwise from top) The comedian at the Sydney premiere of *Trainwreck* with co-star Bill Hader; on *Inside Amy Schumer*; taking on Hollywood sexism in a hilarious viral skit with Tina Fey, Patricia Arquette and Julia Louis-Dreyfus.

“My mental health is not in the hands of strangers on the internet”

world tour in September, got worldwide media attention. A few minutes into her sold-out show, a heckler shouted, “Show us your tits.” She mocked him gently, but when he repeated the offence, had security throw him out. “It was so bad, so old-school,” she says. “It’s funny because it’s gone so viral and I didn’t say anything particularly funny. I have clips where I’ve handled hecklers in ways I’m really proud of, but this was very basic. It wasn’t out of the ordinary for me.” Does she ever simply ignore hecklers? “It’s not just about my experience. It was 10,000 people, who are like, ‘How is she going to handle this?’ I don’t want to



ignore someone yelling, ‘Show us your tits.’ It’s cool, though – it’s like having an internet troll in front of you. I get to see what you look like.”

When criticism piles up online, she’s similarly sanguine. “My confidence and my mental state are not in the hands of anonymous strangers on the internet,” she says. “I’m so used to it by now.” In lower moments, she confesses, “I have those feelings, like, ‘Ugh, I should get out of this f*cking business,’ and then I’ll be like, ‘No, f*ck that.’ I have a small window where I feel upset, and then I get fired up. With comics, all these obstacles end up being fodder for us.”

Ultimately, she says, it’s her loved ones whose opinions matter most. “It’s just about if I’m getting along with my boyfriend and sister.” And is she? “Yes, we’re super-happy, thanks.”

That boyfriend is Ben Hanisch, a furniture-designer and maker whom she met on a dating app last year (he was her first match). When *Stellar* speaks to Schumer, she’s about to go to Paris with him for a holiday (her Instagram later reveals the pair were hospitalised for food poisoning while there, making headline news). Schumer, who appears to be deeply in love, says she’s open to the idea of marriage and babies. It’s hard to work out when she’ll find the time, though – she has two movies out next year: one a mother-daughter comedy with Goldie Hawn, and a dramatic role in *Thank You For Your Service*, which tackles post-traumatic stress among war veterans. Her TV show is on hiatus for now, but she’s keeping all options open.

“If something great comes up, I’m really happy to do movies. I’m going to continue to do stand-up and I want to continue to write stuff for myself,” she says. “I love writing – I get lost in it and it feels like an escape, a nourishing, wholesome escape.”

It sounds as if the world is at her feet. After a pause, she concurs: “I’m very lucky to be part of this revolution.” ★ *Amy Schumer’s The Girl With The Lower Back Tattoo* (HarperCollins, \$29.99) is out now.