



# Life in Australia took a ribbing from American wit

Review by Bill Shorten

**A**s a politician you'd think I'd be most interested in the Politics section of Peter Ruehl's book *Men are Stupid, Women are Crazy* but for me the greatest insights come from those sections where Ruehl gets personal – Family and Life.

One of my favourite pieces is "How I met my mother-in-law, my friend", where, in the last paragraph, Ruehl writes: "As many of you alert readers will know, for many years I've been irregularly chronicling the births, deaths, whims and foibles in our nutty family. Some people have told me they feel like a part of it and in a sense they – you – are. Audrey [his mother-in-law] kept a collection of these columns – there must be at least 150 of them by now. I'll have to add this last one and the sad thing is she won't get to see it."

Obviously, Ruehl read his columns, which ran in *The Australian Financial Review* for 20-odd years, but this has a funny feeling of prescience about it.

What a pity it is he didn't get to see this book before his sudden death – it would have given him a kick. Well, as long as he'd had a few martinis beforehand.

Ruehl was an old-fashioned American, raised in the '60s and proudly a baby boomer. He moved to Australia in 1986, after marrying his Australian wife, noted journalist Jennifer Hewett, in 1984. He moved here to cover the America's Cup but quickly found a home – one he could observe with both the cynical and probing eye of a journalist and the deep love and humour of a new-found son of this wide, brown land.

His writing shows his love for his adopted country. He might have often been incredulous at some of

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## *petty annoyances and make them funny.*

the things we take for granted, he might sometimes have slipped into Americanisms that left us baffled (thongs are what, again?) but running as a deep vein through all his writing was an understanding of Aussies and what makes us laugh.

You could always tell it was a Tuesday or a Thursday when you were on a plane and you could hear the snorts of laughter from everyone reading the back page of the complimentary *AFR*.

Dividing the book into three sections is a clever way of capturing the essence of Ruehl's, er... diatribes... rants... snide commentary... wry anecdotes (yep, that's the one), in an easily digestible format.

We start with Family. For those who haven't followed his columns, it's good to have this section first; it provides a thorough and intimate look at Ruehl and grounds the book in his life, his love of family, of gin and, of course, of Otis, a regular, made-up character who allows the author to reflect on the differences between Australia and the US.

Well, that's what I always thought. Turns out I was wrong. Otis exists!

The second section, Life, gives us the wry observations of a man who could take all those petty annoyances and day-to-day banalities and give them voice and make them funny to boot. I can't remember the number of times I've been reading a column and said, "Yes! That annoyed me, too!"

From parking to Shakespeare in the education system, Peter led a chorus line of rueful shakes of the head at the absurdities of everyday life.

And then we come, of course, to Politics. I often thought Ruehl didn't like my side of politics but that was wrong. Ruehl didn't like

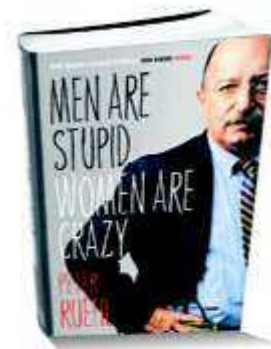
politicians, in that classic American libertarian (and, let's face it, contrarian) way. We are a necessary evil, good only for getting out of the way or, more likely, being mocked unmercifully.

But I never thought his mocking was malicious. Pointed, certainly, funny, always, but never nasty.

Australians are good at adopting others for our own. Russell, Mel (although I think we've given him back), Crowded House, Jimmy Barnes. I'm very pleased Ruehl was added to that list.

He's become, for those who appreciate his wit and humour, an institution and a man we're proud to call our own. Even if he doesn't know what a thong is.

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## Journalism

**MEN ARE STUPID,  
 WOMEN ARE CRAZY**  
**Peter Ruehl**  
**MUP, 307pp, \$29.99**