

Brooks covering the Eritrean war in 1989

Here, in a location as diametrically opposed to the shell-shocked villages of the Middle East as you can find, the former Sydney schoolgirl who always wanted to be a newspaper reporter continues to find human behaviour compulsively interesting. "You get to know people you wouldn't get to know in a city," she explains. "In a city, you seek out people with sympathetic opinions, but in a village you get to know people whether they're sympathetic to you or not."

Brooks found herself collaborating with a lobbyist for the National Rifle Association - "we couldn't be more

different politically" - to save a piece of farmland near her home. "He had a lot of skills that were invaluable and we had a lot of laughs," recalls Brooks. "If I had met him in the city, we would have had that initial argument and that would have been that."

It is that kind of penetrating insight that illuminates all of Brooks's work and has garnered her a reputation both as correspondent and author. It also makes her a wonderful companion because she

is infinitely more knowledgeable than most, having researched and reported on historical and political affairs for years.

Not surprisingly, she holds strong views on many topics, stopping herself mid-sentence sometimes to laugh at her "ranting", as she puts it. She bemoans the growing gap between rich and poor; the failure of the Catholic cardinals to elect a Pope from the Third World to articulate the case for the underprivileged; the impact global warming will have on the poor of the world first... "as always happens".

She also believes, sadly, that Australia is becoming more like the United States every day. "When I was growing up, there was nowhere near as big a difference between rich and poor as there is now. People have to work so much harder and they have to give up their time. Australians used to have this great sense that time was more important than money, but that appears to have changed."

Brooks believes things went awry when Australians began concerning themselves with their place on the world stage.


"We started worrying what the world 'markets' thought of us. I've worked for the markets in New York and I can tell you that the markets are nothing more than privileged 21-year-olds with pimples who know *nothing* about what it is like to work in a factory."

Brooks pauses and quotes writer Robert Kaplan who describes this rich/poor gulf like "a limousine driving through the ghettos with its windows wound up". "We need a mindset change," she concludes firmly.

Despite her horror at the current western canon of destruction and blowing

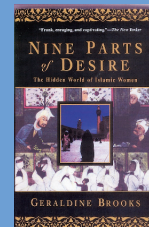
“While Buddhist friends prayed in Tibetan monasteries in honour of their friend, Brooks and family were watching comedy DVDs until their sides hurt.”

things up, Brooks says her persona is ultimately a "light, bright package".

"I get a lot of joy out of simple things. Hanging out with my son is one of my great pleasures, especially when I come out of the rabbit-hole that is writing a book. But I'll keep writing books," she says with a smile, "as long as I can get away with it." 

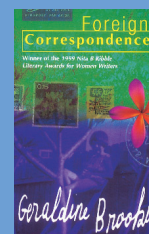
Geraldine Brooks's latest novel, March (HarperCollins, \$30), is out now.

A MASTER STORYTELLER



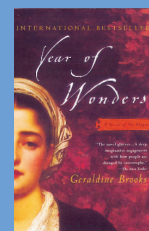
In her 1995 literary debut, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (Random House, \$33), Brooks meets Muslim women throughout

Africa and the Middle East who live behind the veil. To her surprise, she discovers that a feminism of sorts flowers under the forbidding shroud of the chador.



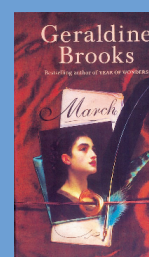
Throughout her childhood in the '60s and '70s, a young Brooks corresponded with friends around the world, and more than 20 years later, her charming 1997

memoir, *Foreign Correspondence* (Random House, \$33), reveals what happened to her former pen pals. *Foreign Correspondence* won the 1999 Kibble Award for non-fiction.



Brooks's first novel, *Year of Wonders* (HarperCollins, \$23), is based on the true story of an English hamlet struck by plague in the 1600s.

Exploring love and learning, fear and fanaticism, and the ongoing struggle between science and religion, this masterful fusion of the personal and historical has been a best seller worldwide.



Riveting, elegant and meticulously researched, *March* (HarperCollins, \$30), is a novel woven out of the lore of the American Civil War. From Louisa May Alcott's classic, *Little Women*, Brooks has taken the character of the absent father, March,

to tell the story of a chaplain whose faith is tested during war.

