

Years of wonder

Foreign correspondent turned author Geraldine Brooks has faced death personally and professionally, but only one event has ever stopped this intrepid woman in her tracks. Josephine Brouard reports.

Photograph by Uri Auerbach. Makeup by Stephen Gould/Mari Vendrame Agency

The first thing you notice about award-winning author Geraldine Brooks is that she is shy, as she has often admitted. It's difficult to figure out how a woman who has covered Middle East conflicts for *The Wall Street Journal* and the United Nations could be retiring, but here she is, timidly entering the executive lounge of a five-star Sydney hotel.

Introductions dealt with, Brooks gives herself over entirely to the interview process, fielding questions deftly, her thoughts unflinchingly erudite, her voice barely louder than a whisper and her running commentary punctuated by chuckles that make her eyes, if it were possible, appear even bluer than they are.

This is a woman who has

not only personally experienced more than a decade of gunfire in some of the world's most hellish war zones, she is also a world-fêted author whose writings have taken the world, and the Northern Hemisphere in particular, by storm. Yet, despite the horrific things she has witnessed and reported, it is clear that Brooks is now, emotionally speaking, in a very calm place.

The last 12 months, she reports, have provided a lot of time for reflection. It was in the last year that she discovered - quite by accident - that she had breast cancer. In Sydney early last year, having completed the final chapter of her latest novel, and pleased to have the time at last to visit museums and catch up with friends, she spied a BreastScreen van in her neighbourhood and thought, 'Why not?' "I've always been an incurable optimist," the Australian-born, US-based writer explains, "so when the follow-up letter arrived from the BreastScreen people, I threw it to a corner of my desk and thought, 'That will be nothing.'" She bursts into laughter when she considers how wrong she was.

"I like the way they treated me at the hospital," Brooks muses of her ministrations at the hands of Australian specialists. "There was no weasel wording; no filtering the message through 10 different people. They just treated me like a grown-up. The radiologist looked at my ultrasound and said, 'It doesn't look good, biopsy for you this afternoon,' and that was that." Brooks recalls walking down the corridor to call her husband, American writer Tony Horwitz, and feeling this heavy weight of grief coming at her. "I remember thinking, 'No, no, we're not going that way, we won't do that.' I made a mental decision on the spot. Having always thought of myself as tough, I said to myself, 'Prove it now!'"

She vividly remembers her decision to succumb to neither negativity nor despair. In fact, despite two rounds of surgery, ▶

Brooks believes Australians are becoming more like Americans every day

