

# Jane Raphaely: "Sugar and spice with lots of salty bits too!"



By Gill Moodie: [@grubstreetSA](#)

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If you're in media today in South Africa, it is well worth getting the autobiography of Jane Raphaely, the trailblazer who made *Fairlady* a publishing phenomenon by taking it to 216,000 circulation (fortnightly and in 500-page issues *no*gall!) in the 1980s, and then struck out on her own to bring *Cosmopolitan* to SA and build the very successful Associated Magazines.

Published last week, the book, [Jane Raphaely unedited](#), is fascinating and fun, suffused with her moxie, offering a unique insight into the evolution of magazines and media in this country from the 1960s.

In this interview, done on the launch of her book last week, Raphaely tells Bizcommunity how she kept one step ahead of her readers, why women's magazines still need to be a girl's best friend and if starting and building something like Associated could still be done today.

■ **You say in the book that it was difficult writing your own story when you're so used to writing other people's stories? Was it a lengthy process?**

**Jane Raphaely:** Very. I think it was about five years, actually. It had to be done in between all the other things I do here (at [Associated Magazines](#) as chairman of the board and editor-in-chief of *O*). And now we have seven grandchildren and they're all in Cape Town so it had to be fitted in between play dates as well.



Jane Raphaely

■ **Besides being the chairman of Associated Magazines' board, you're also editor-in-chief of *O* (The Oprah Magazine), aren't you?**

**Raphaely:** Yes, but that's sort of a strange position. You know, I've always said that if you have a good editor - and we've always had good editors - you don't need an editor-in-chief. But that was a requirement from (US publisher) [Hearst](#)... I think it was to stop me from editing another magazine, which I probably wouldn't have done at that stage but they obviously wanted to tie me in there.

So I'm sort of a godmother. I flit around, being there if they need me and obviously being an arch match-maker. I think that was my job in a previous life: the village matchmaker. I can't resist being an ardent matchmaker with all our magazines (which comprise *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, *O*, *Good Housekeeping*, *House and Leisure* and *Women on Wheels*).

■ **Do you mean matching the right people to the right jobs at Associated?**

Well, it sometimes involves that and sometimes great stories, sometimes excellent connections that lead to stories. I've got some excellent networks and people are always coming up to me and telling me stories, which I love to hear.

■ **What kind of stories do people tell you?**

Very often, it's what I call survival stories. And sometimes wonderful love stories - those are my favourite. And then, of course, I was in public relations (before Nasionale Pers asked her to be the founder editor of *Fairlady*, first published in 1965), copywriting and advertising - and that never goes away. I'm very, very interested in retailing so I have a lot to do with major retailers. This is what you call enlightened self-interest because they know what's happening with women in South Africa.

In fact, they have even more sophisticated means of producing profiles of women in South Africa (than the publishing industry) and if you can get them to sit down and share this with you, this is absolute gold dust if you're in publishing for

women. And then *Business Day* is one of my first reads in the morning. It's absolutely, completely relevant...

■ ***It's interesting you mention you read Business Day every morning as I think many women today read more. So a woman might read Business Day and The Economist and The Atlantic and a whole lot of other titles and websites. Do you think this means that some women are moving on from the need for women's magazines?***

No, I don't think so. None of the things that have come along will replace magazines in a woman's life because a magazine is the one medium in the world that is tailor-made for women. All the other media we're talking about, we're sharing with a mixed audience. But when you want a medium that speaks directly to your most intimate concerns and the things you feel most passionate about, you're more likely to find those things in a women's magazine. I think if women's magazines are doing their jobs properly, they will always be a girl's best friend.



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■ ***But the women's general-interest category is so much more competitive today than when Fairlady was started. There's so much choice and then there are the niche titles such as the décor ones or health or parenting magazines.***

Yes, but if they can't honestly be a girl's best friend, then they don't last. We're seeing a lot more closures now than we did in the past so I would say: 'It's survival of the fittest and the fit do survive'. And perhaps, it's also 'survival of the most flexible'. If you take our company, I think we are one of the most flexible around. We have become many other things as well as magazine publishers.

We find that the events that we organise and the supplements that we carry across our titles, the merchandise that we sell - all of these things are extensions of our relationship with our readers. I don't think it's moving away from magazines; I think it's adding on. And it definitely makes life more interesting.

■ ***You mention in your book that when it came to Fairlady, you gave the readers "sugar and spice" - because that's what you promised on the cover of the very first edition - but "with lots of salty bits too". You really challenged the readers (the topics of abortion-law reform and defending the revival of the Domestic Workers' Union provoked the most hate mail) and you continued that with Cosmo and Femina, with quite a few issues getting banned, encouraging women to stand up for themselves in the apartheid era was really subversive.***

Yes, and many readers weren't put off by that. But it was also subversive as it was coming from the heart of Afrikanerdom: Nasionale Pers. I used to park my car in the company garage and I had a bumper sticker that said 'Apartheid must go'. When PW Botha came to board meetings, I was asked: "Can't you at least park somewhere else?"

■ ***As an 'Engels meisie', I know very little about the history of [Nasionale Pers](#) but I was amazed by the textured story there. They frequently told you they were worried about something you were going to publish, but they never told you not to publish a story.***

Well, that was our (verbal) agreement (that there would be no interference in editorial). And I could never have done the job without that freedom. I don't believe anyone can edit a newspaper or a magazine or anything looking over their shoulder at a proprietor telling them what to do. You have to take risks. You've got to be one step ahead of your readers. You can't possibly do that with a proprietor who is making you wear blinkers and laying down rules on what will and will not be covered...

■ ***Talking about anticipating your readers and staying one step ahead of them, did you ever doubt you were reading them correctly? It doesn't seem so from the book?***

Well, in my experience, because I am not really a crystal-ball gazer even though I tell every editor I work with that they need a crystal ball, I get my inspiration from listening to people and reading, which is also listening to people. And it's only when I am listening to somebody, that that bright light suddenly comes on and I can suddenly see what we need to do next... The leaders I've met in my life are all good listeners. And they all get good results.

■ ***Building Associated Magazines was a remarkable feat, considering there were these big companies such as Nasionale Pers and Republican Press that you had to compete with? Do you think one could build such a***

***business today with Caxton and Media24 dominating the magazine industry? I'm thinking of someone like Khanyi Dhlomo, who [owns Destiny as a JV with Media24](#). The magazine is doing very well.***

She is very, very successful with *Destiny* - and she deserves to be. There is always an opportunity. But sometimes there are circumstances that make it very difficult for even the best product to fly. You've got to have a really, really good retailing system.

For years, we had such an appalling postal system that there was absolutely no point in building magazine subscriptions because our most devoted fans came back and told us: "We can get it on the street more quickly than you can get it to us through the post." You've got to have the right infrastructure and you've got to have the right partners. I think that possibly, in retailing, with some amazing exceptions, we still have some way to go.

#### **📌 Do you see building this remarkable business as your main legacy?**

No, I don't think the business is my biggest legacy. Apart from anything else I have two daughters who run this business now, thus leaving me free to dream and think. In the past, I was very, very hands-on... but this business is much bigger than anything (business partner) Volker Kühnel and I did.

And it's run much more profitably and much more economically - and the way a proper business should be run. I think my legacy, if I'm ready to talk about that sort of thing, is the people whose paths I've crossed and who've done something, not because of me but because they got something from me and then ran with it.

I look at my incredible successful colleagues and what they're doing and a lot of the people who didn't actually work here but who somehow or other picked up that little grain of sand that made them into a pearl because it irritated them until they did something about it... I think that's basically what one would like to think of as one's legacy because that goes on repeating itself. If I'm passing something on, then I'll be happy... But a legacy sounds so final. It's like a lifetime achievement award - you look at it and you say: "But I haven't finished yet." And I definitely haven't finished yet.

### **For more:**

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