

The rise of “popular porn” hasn’t deterred Jackie Collins from churning out her brand of racy prose. On the eve of her Australian tour, the writer talks to Caroline Baum in Beverly Hills.

LONG BEFORE *FIFTY SHADES of Grey*, Facebook, Paris Hilton, MILFs, Brangelina, Lindsey Lohan and the

Kardashians, there was Lucky Santangelo, the hell-raising wild child who blazed a fictional trail across seven bestselling “bonkbusters” – starting with *Chances* in 1981 and continuing, three decades later, with *Goddess of Vengeance*. The daughter of Italian-American former gangster Gino, Lucky was filthy rich, power hungry, sexually voracious and Jackie Collins’ proudest and most-loved creation.

Now, two years after *Goddess of Vengeance*, Collins has returned to where it all began in a prequel to the saga, *Confessions of a Wild Child*, which chronicles Lucky’s dissolute teens after she discovers her mother’s murdered body floating in the family swimming pool. Every page seethes with misdirected teenage hormones. The ultimate Valley Girl, Lucky embodies the most venal and vulgar excesses of Vegas and Hollywood.

Collins, the younger, 75-year-old sister of actress Joan, writes about what she knows: she was, she tells me, a real wild child in her day. All her stories are carefully stored away for the moment when she “retires” Lucky and decides to tell her own story. It’ll be called *Reform School or Hollywood*, she says: she was threatened with the former, but chose the latter.

She’s already got the opening line: “*Don’t move, bitch, or I’ll blow your face off with an Uzi*,” words uttered to her by a masked carjacker 20 years ago in Beverly Hills. Collins, bejewelled for a night out, was having none of it: she coolly reversed her new Mercedes at high speed and sped off into the night, unharmed.

Collins blithely throws such juicy morsels to interviewers as if teasing lions with bite-sized chunks of prime steak, occasionally pausing to



Wild child: author Jackie Collins says she hasn't worn leopard print since "it became tacky".

“I live LIKE A bachelor”

correct the more salacious details that have become part of the Collins mythology. No, she wasn’t 15 when she ran away from school, threw her uniform in the Thames and had an affair with the then 29-year-old Marlon Brando: she was 17. “Almost legal,” she jokes. She remembers him as a sensitive creature who meditated, played bongos and once lost his temper with her for killing a fly.

Brando wasn’t her first encounter with a star. “I recently found my journal from when I was 15,” she says. “In it, I read that Robert Mitchum chased me around a kitchen table but, you know, I have no recollection of even meeting him. Then later, there was Errol Flynn,” she adds matter-of-factly, as if such encounters were normal teenage rites of passage. “They were a lot older than me, but they had real charisma, the kind you can’t manufacture.” So who has that today? “George Clooney,” she says, without hesitation.

BORN IN WEST LONDON’S MAIDA VALE, COLLINS grew up near Baker Street with Joan and their younger brother, Bill, in a theatrical household that doubtlessly shaped the sisters’ appetite for glamour. It was a social hub where her mother, Elsa, a quiet blonde beauty, entertained the clients of her theatrical agent husband Joseph who would later go on to include, among others, the Beatles and Tom Jones.

Joe – whom she described on Twitter recently as Don Draper-handsome – was a chauvinist and disciplinarian, who regarded his youngest daughter as nothing but trouble. When she played truant and turned punk “before there were punks”, it was he who threatened her with reform school and burned her fashionable clothes in an effort to tame her.

But it was too late; she was already slipping out of her bedroom window at night to hang out at

The Flamingo Club in Soho. “I was out of control,” she admits, “but I was street smart, too.”

Her relationship with Joe may have been stormy, but she credits him with providing the undeniably wide “kick-ass” streak in her character which, as she likes to point out on book tours, she shares with more than one of her heroines.

Today, after a lifetime of red-carpet photo ops, VIP parties and two marriages, Collins lives alone in a stark, white, cubic Beverly Hills mansion of her own design that was inspired by a David Hockney painting. Unlike other stars on Beverly Drive (her neighbour is Al Pacino), who hide their faux-French provincial and mock-Tudor mansions behind high hedges and camouflage the walls in ivy manicured by an army of Mexican gardeners, Collins prefers her pile to be visible from the street, demonstrating what LA real-estate agents call “curb appeal.”

Inside, the house is all tall, white space and curved lines, like being on an ocean liner. “I like art deco,” she says, explaining the sleek design. But she has a hard time with minimalism. The library, where we spend an hour talking, is filled with favourite *objets* sourced from regular visits to Parisian flea markets.

The faux leopard throw that’s on the sofa is vintage Collins, the print repeated on chairs and echoed in a display of big cats of all shapes and sizes. “In a previous life, I must have been a panther,” she says, as if this were the only plausible explanation.

Collins hasn’t worn leopard print since “it became tacky”, adding that she designs most of her clothes herself. “Jackets are my thing,” she says, before confiding that she has a collection of more than 100, many of them never worn and most of them in black, like the one she’s wearing as part of a pants suit today. “I enjoy having a uniform,” she says; “a bit like Katharine Hepburn.”

She’s heavily made up as if for a photo shoot (which she has declined) and wears her thick long hair with the sides swept up and caught at the back. It’s still a handsome mane. In pictures taken in the 1980s it appears almost leonine, doubling in volume to defy gravity and held in place by what must have been a force field of lacquer. It’s real, she assures me. She wears two small red Buddhas studded with diamonds around her neck: “I’m a hovering Buddhist,” she confides. “I realised in my teens that I was a very old soul.”

If, like everyone in Hollywood, she’s had work done, the result isn’t a stretched mask. She disapproves of actors who deny having had plastic surgery, yet sidesteps the question neatly when I ask her directly if she has.

“I think of myself as European,” she says. “We don’t deny age. I feel like I’m still 30, and sometimes I feel like I’m 16.” Her accent is that strange hybrid some call mid-Atlantic, in which British vowels collide with a slight American slur.

COLLINS IS UNEXPECTEDLY DOWN TO EARTH, her website featuring, among other things, British recipes – toad in the hole and Guinness cake – that are big on comfort carbs. She refuses to starve herself and swims and plays ping-pong for exercise, “but I don’t have a trainer; they just stand there looking bored”.

An avowed workaholic who writes 10 hours a day, Collins starts a new book the day after she finishes one, but not because she needs the money or has anything to prove. Four hundred million copies sold in 40 languages are enough to put both E.L. James and J.K. Rowling in their places. “I keep on,” she admits, “because I just love telling myself stories.”

A *Time* magazine critic once famously said of her 1990 book, *Lady Boss* – the third in the Santangelo series – that “it offers the readers a

rare opportunity to watch adverbs mate”, but Collins refuses to be drawn on the raciness of her sex scenes. “I create interesting characters,” she says demurely. “My readers do the rest.”

COLLINS KNEW SHE WOULD BE A writer at eight years of age. Exhibiting a precocious entrepreneurial streak, she wrote dirty limericks in her diary and charged school friends to read them. “The only book in the house I can remember was *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, which my father kept in a brown paper wrapper,” says Collins. “He had a fit when he read my stuff later on, although he was an adulterer.

“That double standard affected Joan and me differently. I accepted him for what he was, but my sister developed a father complex that determined her choices. I was giving her love advice as a teen.” (Joan is happily married to her fifth husband, Percy Gibson, who is 32 years her junior.)

Although a mutual friend once described the sisters as being “as competitive as gladiators”, they’re now closer than they’ve been for some years, finally released, perhaps, from a lifetime’s rivalry by age and experience. “If Joan is in Hollywood, we see each other three times a week,” says Collins.

Both sisters are rich, but Jackie is seriously wealthy. In 2011, *The Sunday Times* Rich List placed her as the UK’s fifth-richest author with an estimated fortune of \$100 million, earned not only from her book sales, but from merchan-

“I never missed anything once I got married”: (right, from top) Jackie Collins marrying her first husband, Wallace Austin, in 1960; with her fiancé Frank Calcagnini, who died in 1998 of a brain tumour; Collins regularly sees her sister, Joan, who is four years her senior.



readers fizzed with speculation as to their real-life inspirations, Collins maintained that they were composites. “Back then, [Hollywood wives] were unambitious for themselves, channelling everything into their husbands and playing tennis,” she says. “Now they all want to be producers and have causes. But they don’t just do good, they need to talk about it all the time.”

Collins herself is a discreet donor to charities that support the children of crack-addicted mothers and AIDS sufferers. “I don’t like giving money to things that send out costly invitations on expensive paper,” she says. “That’s just for show and a waste. If I read about someone in need in the paper, I contact them direct.”

DESPITE WRITING ABOUT SPOILED children who go off the rails (Lucky is led astray by her friend, Olympia, a piece of work who bears more than a passing resemblance to several real-life blingsters), Collins was strict with her three daughters, who attended a posh girls’ school in London. Today, Tracy is a counsellor, Rory a self-published author and Tiffany a designer of children’s wear.

“I picked them up after school, I was a very present parent and gave them no freedom. Also, it was before cell phones. I saw what Kathy Hilton let Paris wear when she was 10 or 11, those provocative outfits, and I do blame Dina Lohan for what has happened to Lindsay, because she’s had no guidance. They were little adults too soon.”

Her next project is her first play, *Hollywood Lies*,

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dise, including her perfume, Chances.

For 26 years, following a brief, early marriage to Wallace Austin, Collins was married to Oscar Lerman, 20 years her senior and father to two of her daughters. He later adopted Tracy, the daughter she had with Austin. When Lerman developed prostate cancer, Collins nursed him until his death in 1992. Later, her fiancé Frank Calcagnini, a friend of her husband’s, died of a brain tumour in 1998 before they were able to marry.

Despite the raunchiness of her books, Collins advocates marital fidelity. The French film director Louis Malle, who was married to her friend, the actress Candice Bergen, once described her as “a raunchy moralist”, a description that pleases her. “I don’t write adultery, I do good married sex,” says the author, whose first best-seller, *The World Is Full of Married Men*, published in 1969, was once banned in Australia. “Because I was so wild when I was young, I never missed anything once I got married. I really do recommend that you try everything beforehand. The secret to a happy marriage is good food and good sex.

“When friends ask for advice on how to keep a relationship from going stale, I recommend role-playing. Not fetishism, it’s just not practical, but a weekend away in a nice hotel, a couple of times a year. You play a game, create a fantasy, use wigs and props, stay in character the whole time and then afterwards never discuss it. My only rule is no beating.”

She confesses, at this point, to being slightly annoyed by the *Fifty Shades* fuss (“The sex is vaguely old-fashioned – the old virgin and billionaire scenario”) and the “mummy porn” phenomenon: “I was doing blow jobs before anyone,” she says indignantly. Presumably, she doesn’t mean that literally. “Cunnilingus is the new blow job,” she adds, as if discussing this season’s fashion colours.



As for Michael Douglas blaming oral sex for his throat cancer, “It was a stupid comment and now of course if men don’t want to do it, they have the perfect excuse. Imagine the outcry if a woman said she’d got throat cancer from giving blow jobs!”

She recently tweeted her disgust at disgraced American politicians Anthony Weiner and Eliot Spitzer, whose comeback attempts have both proved ill-fated. “If a woman had sexted images of her boobs, she’d never get a second chance, so why should they? If they’re so keen on public service, why don’t they just go work with the homeless?” Later she tweets, “Why do men in power have such trouble keeping it zipped?”

Today, she enjoys flirting and dates occasionally (“but not online like Martha Stewart, I get friends to introduce me”). She’s currently seeing a man who’s separated and is happy to pay for dinner: “I live like a bachelor and enjoy my freedom,” she says.

In 1983, Collins published her ninth and most successful novel, *Hollywood Wives*, which was peopled with screen vixens, talent agents, fading movie stars, society hostesses, ambitious interior decorators and escort agency madams. While

about a young singing star whose mother has taken over her life and who ends up in rehab. She describes it as “Jackie Collins meets Agatha Christie”. She writes all her books in longhand and then has them bound in leather to line the shelves of her library. Crime-writer Harlan Coben is a friend and she is a fan of J.K. Rowling; she keeps an eye on rival best-seller sales figures. As a reader, she prefers biographies of celebrities, including gangsters and crims. Despite being famous herself and having plenty of famous pals (she has a weekly dinner date with Michael and Shakira Caine), she shares the public’s fascination with the royal family and the current generation of Hollywood stars.

Like everyone who is anyone in LA, she has an addiction, but at least hers is harmless: television. “I have to limit myself. I only allow myself to switch it on at 4pm.” She tweets about her favourite shows, *The Americans*, *House of Cards*, *Dexter* and the reality-TV franchise of *The Real Housewives*.

But she also knows about hardcore addiction. “My first husband was addicted to ephedrine, or speed, back in the ’60s, when no one knew ... he was bipolar, too. I’m all in favour of people trying everything once, but because I grew up in night-clubs and saw people off their face from an early age, that made me wary.”

Collins has no intention of retiring. She still relishes author tours, like her forthcoming trip to Australia in October, posting selfies with fans on her Facebook page. She has embraced e-publishing, personally re-issuing classic Collins titles, such as *Lucky* and *Lady Boss*, for a new generation of readers who may be unaware that she – along with Jacqueline Susann – really were the first women to write explicit popular fiction. Chances are, when she finally gets around to writing that autobiography, it’ll be her best work of fiction yet. **GW**