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Gemma Gracewood | Guest writer



Elisabeth Easter, host and star of *Islands in the Gulf*.

### **A daughter remakes her mother's iconic TV series**

**Gemma Gracewood talks to her sort-of-sister Elisabeth Easter, the host of new TV One series *Islands of the Gulf*, in which Easter revisits her mother's trailblazing documentary series.**

Elisabeth Easter's brother is married to my sister, so we've been "sisters-out-law" since we were riotous teens. I've watched Elisabeth go from playing Victoria the dinosaur in children's show *Johnson and Friends*, to *Shortland Street* villain Carla Crozier, sister of Robyn Malcolm's character Ellen.

I produced her first play *Raw* at the old Basement Theatre, and was delighted when she won the Adam New Zealand Play Award for *Seed*. And as I've watched her become a travel writer of note, I recall our own international adventures, from music festivals in Bristol to nude bath-houses in Germany.

It's satisfying, as a proud sister-out-law, to see all these things come together in her new series *Islands of the Gulf*, in which she retraces the steps of her mother, pioneering broadcaster Shirley Maddock. Elisabeth's mum was an inspiration. New Zealand's first woman television producer, she possibly wrote the first news broadcast when television started transmitting in New Zealand in 1960.

In 1964, Maddock made the original *Islands of the Gulf* programme, a landmark achievement as New Zealand's first documentary series. The five-episode series and its accompanying book made her a household name. When her children were born, the women's magazines made a deal of it.



Shirley Maddock in a still from *Islands of the Gulf*, 1964. Photo: NZ on Screen

**When were you first aware that your mother was no ordinary mother, but a famous broadcaster?**

I first became aware my mother was more than just a housewife when people would either say to her "Hey, aren't you Shirley Maddox?" Or, "Cherry Raymond from the TV!" She hated that. [Cherry Raymond was another television personality with "very prominent spectacles".]

I knew there was something going on. I knew when people came up to us in the street and obviously had some prior knowledge of her. She was doing all this in the 60s, I was born in

1970. It's been 20 years since I was on *Shortland Street* and I still get recognised on a daily basis, so you can imagine –

**On a daily basis?**

Yes. On a daily basis. And it still makes me feel awkward. And Mum was so much more famous than me, because she was one of the few people on television.

Television was brand new. This was the first content from New Zealand, so everybody watched it. People would all go around to the house with the television and crowd around it. It was *the* event. It was like when Madonna comes to town: you wouldn't not go. When there was New Zealand television on the box, you wouldn't not watch.

**When you were making the series, was there anything that hit you about your mother that hadn't occurred to you before?**

One of the things that really hit me while making the programme was that I didn't ask my mother enough when she was alive – and I had quite a lot of warning that she was going to die [Maddock died in 2001]. I thought I'd asked her everything. We'd spoken about everything. But as the years have gone by I realise of course we hadn't.

I wanted to know what was it like on the *Islands* shoots. Who went with you? How did you carry all that stuff? What happened when you had your period? How did you do your ironing? You always looked so crisp. I look like a beetroot in a blue dress!

I didn't ask any of those questions. But what I'd mostly been saying was "I love you and I think you're amazing", but I hadn't really come to terms with why and how she was amazing.

**Give us an idea of just how revolutionary Shirley was in her day.**

In Mum's day – I mean, it's hard enough for women now, as we're discovering with all of the daily molestation and the "me toos" – but Mum lived in a time where women were simply there to look pretty or do a bit of typing. They were there to make men feel better. Or make babies. They certainly weren't there to advance their careers. Women had a very short shrift. And Mum, I don't know how or why, managed to think, "Oh, no, I think I want a bit more than that". There was no other woman doing what she did. But she didn't need a role model, she became one.

**Did your mother have a "me too" moment?**

Sort of. There's a funny story about how she became a "woman producer". It wasn't a title that women could have in broadcasting back then, but some senior person was rather drunk at a party – or "tight" as they'd say back then – and the next day at the office she held him to a

drunken promise he'd made at the party that she could have the title "producer" – as long as it had the word "woman" in front of it.

### **What do you love about the original series?**

I love seeing Mum. I love hearing Mum. I mean, to see her hop in a seaplane with a camera and just go off and find people. I love the way she is with people. I love that we'd always lose track of her as a family and she'd be somewhere talking to strangers and questioning people. She'd come back and she'd know their life story. Everything would come out, and she just had a marvelous way with people. People spoke freely because she made them comfortable. My friends would come around to play and would say "Oh my god, your mother, I just told her everything!"



Elisabeth Easter jumps off a pier on Kawau Island.

**Your mother also had marvelous pieces of advice. When I was first studying to become a television producer, she said to me "This will be the best advice I can give you for when you get your first job: 'Never say you understand when you don't'."**

Yes! Never say "I understand" when you don't. Even if you have to ask three or four times, make sure you understand what you've been asked to do.

**I ran into some elderly TV industry men at Avalon Studios once. Turns out they had known Shirley, and the piece of advice she gave them was hilarious: "Never have as many chairs at a party as you have invited guests."**



Because then somebody would have to stand up, and that would encourage them to mingle. That was totally Shirley. One of the other brilliant Shirley pieces of advice, which I'd always get when I went off to school camp or secondary schools choir, she'd say "Don't make friends in the first three days". She'd explain, "When I traveled by ship to England" – and that was always the way she'd go – "I didn't make friends in the first three days. Because you will always get the wrong person attach themselves to you. So be calm, hang back." Of course I've failed miserably!

**Speaking of making new friends, what connections did you make with the people who were in the original series?**

We found Vern Cotter, who was a toddler in Motuihe episode of the original series helping to round up the sheep with a little switch. He was most recently the coach of the Scottish rugby team and has just gone to a French club, Montpellier.

We took him back to the family farm, which is now a nature reserve. And this laconic, manly chap spoke with a lump in his throat of how his parents spoke of their time on the islands. They were the happiest days of their lives. I had a moment right there, on a hot, hot day, of being covered in goosebumps. And that's one of many beautiful moments in the series.



Elisabeth Easter on Warren Green's boat in Islands of the Gulf.

### **Do you have a favourite Hauraki Gulf island?**

People ask me this and I don't know. It's like asking about your favourite children. Probably Rakino, because it was the one my mother fell in love with. I love Great Barrier Island because it's got everything and it's so far away. I love Rangitoto because it's new and it's connected to the oldest island by a causeway. How cool is that? I love Waiheke, but you have to get away from the people. I love Motuihe because there *are* no people. My deep dream is to live in the country by the sea.

### **What do you wish Aucklanders knew or understood more about the islands?**

I just think they should go and visit them. It is so easy to jump on a ferry and go and spend the day at Tiritiri Matangi. Go out, see them all, it's not that expensive, and you will be astonished what is just minutes from the traffic jams.

### **Final question: can you tell us what Nurse Carla Crozier has been up to?**

What a lot of people don't know is that while she's been in the Home for Distressed Murderous Nurses, she's actually done an online psychology course and she's now a PhD in Psychiatry and looking for a job in Auckland, specifically Ferndale where she has quite a connection. Carla was deeply misunderstood. She has since done a lot of delving into the human psyche and she is ready to use those skills at *Shortland Street*... [trails off, laughing maniacally.]

***Islands of the Gulf starts Saturday 24 February at 7.00pm on TV One.***

*Gemma Gracewood is a TV and film producer, writer and mum, and once had a storylining internship at Shortland Street that went nowhere after Elisabeth convinced her to run away and see Disney on Ice one lunchtime.*