



Andrew Denton is the king of television heart-to-heart interviews. With his new TV show about advertising, we turn the tables on him

The,
nation's
confessor

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The creative source of all the best elements of Andrew Denton's brilliant career in radio, television and film is the playful and happy family life he enjoyed growing up in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney and the abiding influence of his mother, Le and his father, Kit. Both his parents have passed away, but Denton describes their ongoing influence on his life and values as "strong, very strong".

"I grew up in a family where some of the defining characteristics were that there was an awful lot of laughter and mucking about and an awful lot of wordplay and stupidity," he tells me with a grin when we meet at the home of Denton's production company, Zapruder's.

The office is on the ninth floor of an office block in the business heart of North Sydney and, in case you are wondering, the name comes from Abraham Zapruder, who filmed the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas on a home movie camera. This silent footage is perhaps the most watched piece of film in human history.

Denton, 48, went to high school at Blue Mountains Grammar and then studied Media and Communications at Mitchell College of Advanced Education, now Charles Sturt University, in Bathurst, NSW. As we sit down to talk on the couch in his office, which is jam-packed with papers and books, it occurs to me that Charles Sturt University must be very proud of this graduate.

Denton has just finished a lengthy production meeting for *The Gruen Transfer*, his weekly television show on advertising hosted by Wil Anderson (ABC TV, Wednesdays 9pm). I'm a bit concerned he may be too distracted to talk about his life. But I soon realise he has the capacity to focus immediately on the task at hand and he readily gives me his full attention.

Just before we go to his office, Denton invites me to watch some hilarious and bizarre Japanese ads featuring poodles and Brad Pitt's cheeky bottom. The ads are greeted by the production team with a mix of glee and bemusement. One wall of the room is covered in 70 or 80 cards, each with an idea. It seems his childhood home and his adult working life have a lot in common.

"When people came into our house," he remembers with affection, "there was an energy and a madness to it that some people found hard to take because it was overwhelming. It was very vigorous and there was a lot of debate."



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Denton describes his mother Le as, "this incredibly social creature who, whenever she met anyone, knew everything about them within five minutes". He laughs with affection as he recalls: "She was like an emotional succubus. She asked lots of questions, but people loved it. She was one of those people you opened up to. She was like a confessor."

You don't have to be Dr Freud to deduce a connection between his mother's gift as "a confessor" and Denton's current job as the producer and presenter of *Enough Rope* on ABC TV, now in its sixth year.

This image of the "confessor" is echoed

when I speak to Julian Morrow, the current executive producer of the *Chaser* team, for whom Denton acted as co-producer and script editor for their first three years on television. Morrow says Denton has carved out a niche on *Enough Rope* as "the national confessional" so "when big things happen, or people stuff up, they go there, unless they're really, really in trouble, in which case they do *Australian Story*".

Whatever lessons Denton learnt at his mother's knee, he learnt them well. In one of this year's most high-profile examples of the confessional in action, Denton's interview



with troubled footballer Wayne Carey attracted a five-city audience of nearly 1.5 million viewers. The only episode of *Enough Rope* to beat it was the Danish royals special with 1.539 million viewers.

The ratings success of *Enough Rope* has been echoed in the success of *The Election Chaser* in 2001 and *CNNNN* in 2002-2003. Julian Morrow says Denton was the “comedy fairy godfather” for the *Chaser* boys, teaching them “how to do television comedy”. When Denton suggested the *Chaser* boys work with him in television, Morrow says, they admired his work so much, “If he’d said, do you want to come and work in my abattoir, we’d have said yes.”

According to Morrow, Denton taught them rigorous planning; the discipline of reworking

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ideas until they are right; and a commitment to preserving their creative space from interference. He says there was a clause in the *Chaser*’s original contract with Denton that he would “protect us from non-essential dickheads” and he used his “status and influence” to do just that.

The importance of protecting the freedom of your creative space is one of the many fundamental values Denton inherited from his father, Kit. Kit Denton is best known as the author of *The Breaker*, the story of Harry (Breaker) Morant, who was executed during the Boer War. Originally from London’s East End, Kit was a broadcaster with the British forces in Germany before migrating to Australia, where he was a broadcaster with the ABC from 1951 to 1965, and later a full-time writer. He published novels, short stories and works of history as well as radio and television scripts.

In 2007, Denton launched the Kit Denton Fellowship, an annual \$25,000 fellowship “to reward and promote courage and excellence in performance writing”. Denton admired his father’s integrity and commitment to truth. At the launch of the fellowship he described an example: “A decade after the release of *The Breaker*, Kit Denton published *A Closed File*, a non-fiction work detailing information he had received in the intervening years, which acknowledged the dramatic licence he took in the original novel. Kit was interested in truth, even if it was at his own expense.”

In the tender obituary he wrote for his

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father in *The Australian* when he died, aged 68, in 1997, Denton described his dad as “a raconteur, teacher, counsellor and friend” and “a powerful presence”. He thanked him for the “wonderful childhood” he’d given Denton and his sisters, Jo and Philippa: “The word I mostly associate with our childhood is ‘magic’ ... and often ‘plain lunacy’.”

Clearly heartbroken, Denton finished this tribute: “We will miss him in our bones and our souls.” (I remember reading this obituary at the time and feeling deeply moved. It is the dream of every parent to be remembered in such a way by their child.)

However, the legacy of Denton’s childhood has a business-like aspect as well. The source of Denton’s tough-minded approach to negotiating deals, stepping up to the challenge of production and maintaining creative control also lies within his family history, particularly his observation of his father’s experiences as a writer, historian, and producer. When we talk about his father’s work, I am struck by Denton’s determination not suffer his father’s fate when it comes to the business side of a creative life.

“I really thank him for the way he chose to lead his career because it taught me a lot of ways to act and a lot of ways not to act,” Denton tells me. He says his father’s move to the Blue Mountains didn’t help his career. “He basically moved himself away from the community in which he worked and what eventually happened was that he fell out of contact with his own industry,” Denton explains. “Work became harder to get.”

Jennifer Byrne, Andrew Denton and their son Connor attend the 2008 Tropfest in Sydney’s Domain.



By contrast, Denton’s offices and team of 30 are working in the heart of commercial Sydney, in sight of Sydney Harbour. He hasn’t confined himself to the ABC. He has worked for commercial radio on Triple M’s *Andrew Denton Breakfast Show* from 1997 to 2002 and on the Seven Network with the chat show *Denton* in 1994 and 1995. Far from being professionally isolated, he has built relationships across the broad spectrum of the Australian media.

For his latest venture on *Enough Rope*, he assembled a core team of people from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Roy and HG’s show, ABC Archives, *Lateline* and *60 Minutes*. Denton proudly tells me, “None of them had ever met each other and they clicked. Bang. I’ve got a good eye.”

Denton pays tribute to two people in particular, his business partner Peter Thompson and head of development Anita Jacoby. “Anita brings an incredible work ethic and she’s got great people skills, whereas I can miss things because I am so focused on



Wil Anderson, host of Denton’s show about advertising, *The Gruen Transfer*, ABC TV, Wednesdays, 9pm.

the idea. She is the best when it comes to interviews. She's got commercial judgment, which I really wanted. I wanted to make a show that lots of people wanted to watch and I've been very clear and aggressive about that since day one," Denton explains.

Denton describes Peter Thompson, a partner in TressCox Lawyers, where Thompson set up their media law division, as "the hidden part of the work I do". Thompson's role is to be "adviser and negotiator when it gets down to the nuts and bolts of a deal". Denton recalls how he watched his father and many of his friends "taken all the way to the altar on a deal many times and then dumped". As a result, Denton regards himself as "quite a fierce negotiator" who came into the industry "with an unusually combative attitude". He says he is "very clear about what I want and what I don't want" and "unusually pragmatic and willing to fight for my own quarter".

The career lessons Denton learnt from his father's experience have borne valuable fruit because, by any measure, Andrew Denton is one of the most successful people in the Australian media. His early work, starting in 1988, as a writer and presenter on the ABC TV series *Blah Blah Blah*, *The Money or the Gun* and *Live and Sweaty* pioneered an unusual combination of comedy and interviews, in an atmosphere of anarchic informality, featuring a mix of both famous and ordinary people.

He also pioneered, on ABC TV, a new type of documentary, combining empathy, humour and a refreshingly direct style of questioning. He dealt with sensitive and confronting subjects and he put people on our TV screens who don't usually get screen time in prime time.

In his TV special, *Year of the Patronising Bastard*, he spoke to people with disabilities

and in *The Topic of Cancer* he interviewed teenagers with cancer from CanTeen. His recent documentaries have taken a similar approach, avoiding experts and connecting the audience to the direct experience of ordinary people. Denton's 2006 film *God On My Side* was filmed at the National Religious Broadcasters' Convention in Texas. In April, he broadcast *Angels and Demons*, talking to people with mental illness and reaching an audience of nearly 1 million.

All his work, and there's plenty more to mention, such as the *World Series Debating* in the early 90s and *The Logies* that he co-produced, hosted and reworked in 1999 and 2000, is a quirky combination of empathy, probing questions and good, clean fun. (Many of us will go to our graves thanking him for the sheer silliness of the 25 versions of the Led Zeppelin classic *Stairway to Heaven* on *The Money or the Gun*.)

Denton sums up his work in this way: "If you look at my career, what is it? It's asking questions. I've been trying to find out; I haven't been suggesting I know."

The other unifying element is the search for the "deeply human story". Denton is proud that the biggest group of people interviewed over the show's five years is "a collective group of people nobody has heard of". He's talking about people like the three cab drivers, the mother and her son with schizophrenia, and the three homeless people, along with Richard E Grant, Bill Clinton, Mel Brooks and Steve Irwin.

There has been much debate over Denton's interview with the footballer Wayne Carey. Denton describes it as "the most gruelling interview I've ever done" because "I was powerfully aware of the dangers of the interview and the pressure on this man. The danger of that kind of interview is that it is too much for a person to take." The reason

for interviewing Carey, Denton says, is the same as for all the other guests they choose: it is "a deeply human story". "Wayne Carey," he explains, "represents something that is quite widespread in our community, which is problems with alcohol, aggression and domestic violence."

Underpinning all of Denton's professional success is his commitment to family, his wife, the journalist Jennifer Byrne, and their 13-year-old son, Connor. Denton protects their privacy, especially for his son, but he responds warmly to my question about Jennifer's place in his life.

"Jennifer has always been a lot more worldly and classy and engaged at a social level than I am," he says, "so we represent good opposites. She's really smart, so for somebody like me, who needs to be engaged all the time, she's always engaging to me. She's funny. And we both came from strong families, so we get that family comes first. She's taught me to join the optimistic dots in life, not the pessimistic ones."

It is a measure of the deep trauma Denton felt at the loss of his father that he briefly separated from Byrne after his father's death. "I think when Dad died it made me angry in ways I didn't even understand. I just needed to go and be alone. And so I left to save the relationship. It was the right thing to do. I took time away and, whatever it was I was trying to process, I clearly processed."

Denton describes the day his father died as "the most shocking thing that's ever happened in my life".

For days and days after our conversation, his words and his tone of voice kept coming back to me: "It was a beautiful Blue Mountains, autumnal day, crisp and sunny and clear, the sort of day I live for, and my father did, too.

"To see how death just completely picks a strong person up and shakes them empty of everything was profoundly shocking. The noise of it was shocking. The sight of it was shocking. I remember thinking, 'You don't get to play any more. You don't get anything. You don't get the grass. You don't get the sky. You don't get the sun. You don't get to play any more at all. Game over.'"

The very last thing Denton and I talk about is a project for the future he hasn't mentioned publicly before. "I'd love to write a history of the exploration of Antarctica. I've been there four times. They are the best stories never told," he says with a grin. I was thrilled to hear it. It's just the sort of project Kit Denton would have loved. ♦

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Left: Wayne Carey whose interview with Denton in April was watched by 1.5 million people. Below: The *Chaser* Team with Julian Morrow (centre), who describes Denton as 'the comedy fairy godmother'.

