THE FLYNNS' EFFECT

It takes a certain fearlessness to tackle the sacred cows of motherhood the way psychologist Natalie Flynn does in her recent book. Ken Downie discovers she learnt that from her father, an acclaimed Otago University professor whose moral fibre and sense of the absurd shaped their family life.

Ken Downie is a *North & South* contributing writer.
Photography by Ken Downie.

It's Natalie Flynn's eldest child Eli's bar mitzvah. He's embraced the Jewish side of the family and today, everyone is getting involved. Among the guests are grandparents Jim and Emily Flynn, who've come up from Dunedin especially for the event. The new extension to Natalie and husband Michael's Auckland home doesn't have a kosher kitchen, so Natalie isn't sure if the rabbi will be at this afternoon's party.

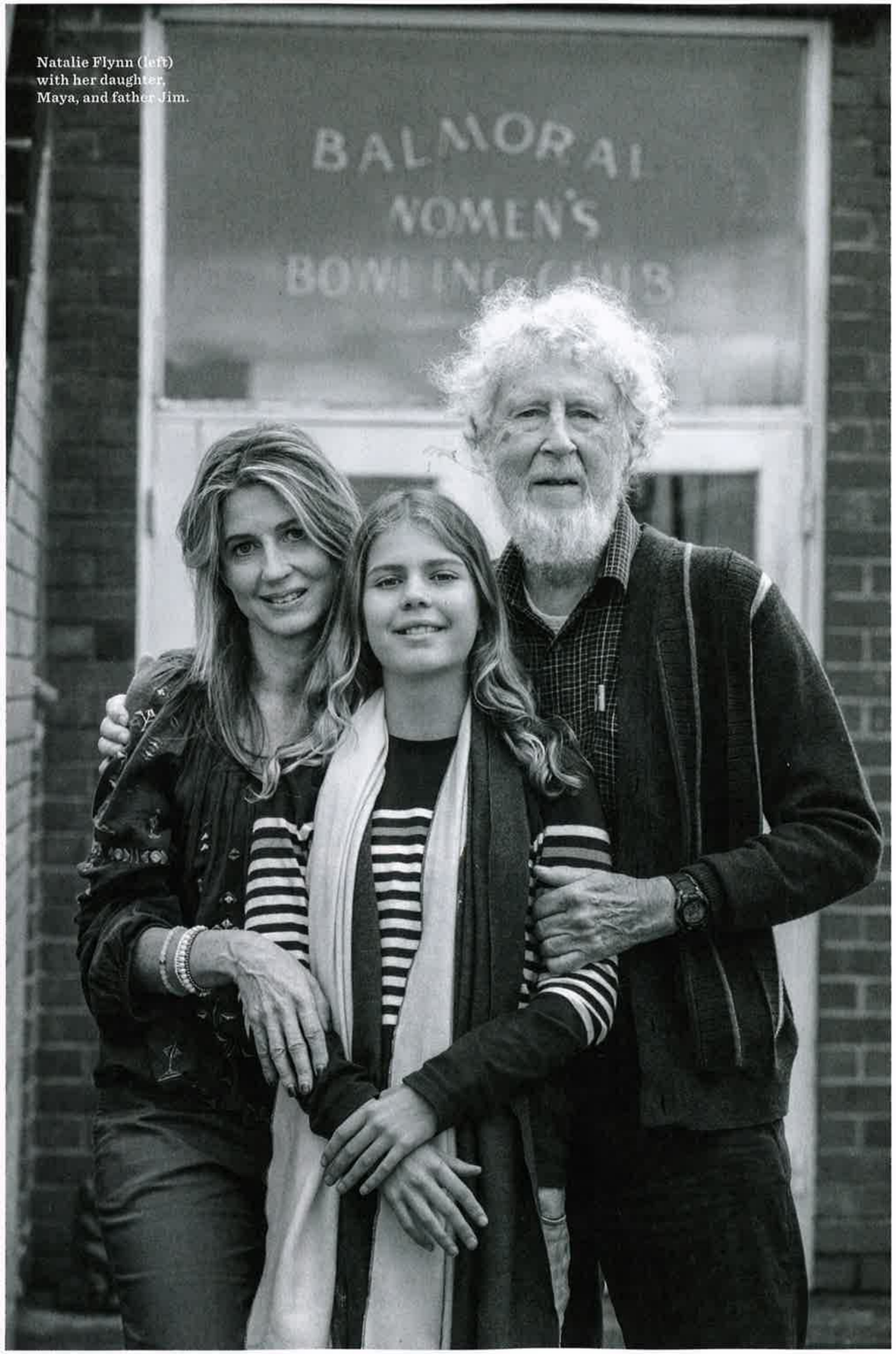
While her own upbringing was "culturally Jewish" on her mother's side, her childhood in 1980s Dunedin was anything but religious. "I definitely was aware of my Jewish identity, but religion was more the subject of debate than belief when I was a kid," says Natalie, the daughter of one of New Zealand's best-known academics (and an atheist), Professor Jim Flynn. Her older brother, Victor, is a mathematics professor at Oxford University.

"Being brought up in a world that embraced diversity and difference as much as ours was all part of being caught in the middle of the Jewish and the radical."

Her illustrious dad, an emeritus professor of political studies, has decided to take it easy for the first time in the 52 years he's been at Otago University. "From now on, I'm reducing my workload to about 35 hours a week," he says. As a researcher into human intelligence, he's world famous for what is known as the "Flynn Effect", after his discovery that population IQ scores rise from one generation to the next.

A life-long socialist and activist, the 85-year-old remains a passionate campaigner for left-wing causes. In more recent years, climate change has become an important focus: his 2016 book *No Place to Hide* predicts the next century "will be the century from hell". He continues to oppose racial bias through his research, showing that environment rather than innate factors causes IQ differences between races, drafting affidavits in cases where an accused inmate in the US might be executed if it can't be shown their IQ is below a certain level. "He's hell-bent on telling the truth," says Natalie. "Regardless of what it is, he will report it. Sometimes our family lives in fear of that!"

The mother of three recently published her first book, *Smart Mothering: What Science Says about Caring for Your Baby and Yourself*, on the dilemmas new parents face. As a clinical psychologist specialising in maternal psychology, she found that women today are bombarded with all sorts of misinformation on mothering. "Mothers kept saying to me, 'Write a book.'" The end result is an in-depth, science-based publication separating fact from opinion on key issues



Natalie Flynn (left) with her daughter, Maya, and father Jim.

Three generations of the Flynn whānau: Natalie and husband Michael Keall, centre, with (from left) daughter Maya, 12; mother Emily; son Eli, 14; father Jim; and son Leon, nine.

from bed-sharing to vaccination.

"Whatever I found, I was going to publish – that's what I learned from Dad," says Natalie. "So when I discovered breast milk was not liquid gold after all, in the book it went."

Jim was born and raised in Washington DC, and his involvement in the US civil rights movement caused him problems in the conservative South of the early 1960s. When he was fired for his social activism, first from Eastern Kentucky University and then from a college up north in Illinois, he and Emily decided to migrate to New Zealand, where he took up a lectureship at Canterbury University. He almost missed the plane.

"Only a day before coming here, I got arrested on a trumped-up charge and chucked in jail. Of course, the real reason was that Vice President LBJ [Lyndon B. Johnson] was coming to town and they thought I might cause trouble. Coming to New Zealand, in 1963, I thought I'd landed in a Jeffersonian democracy!"

But Emily hated it, finding Christchurch stuffy and conservative, and no place for an independent woman. Four years later, the couple moved to Dunedin, where Jim became the founding head of the political studies department at Otago University at the age of 32 – quickly becoming an inspiration to students of the era, with his articulate views on hot issues of the 1960s such as the Vietnam War.

For Emily, things improved in Dunedin, where she got a job as "female current affairs officer" at RNZ. Later, she worked as a maths and science teacher then, when the kids got older, she studied for a law degree, and practised for 15 years before retiring.

Jim still belongs to both the political studies and the psychology departments at Otago University and is busy working on his latest book, *In Defence of Free Speech: The University as a Censor*, due out later this year. That'll be his 13th publication since he officially retired in 1997. As a self-described "scientific realist", his constant quest for truth has seen him write on everything from political philosophy to climate change, including books on psychology, literature, poetry and even how to improve the mind.

Did he have much to do with *Smart Mothering*? "My role was to contribute a graph that showed IQs over time," he says. "Otherwise, it's all Natalie's."

Natalie, 49

"All my friends thought my parents were pretty liberal – and my friends' parents weren't exactly conservative. We didn't seem to have the same rules in our house. We were allowed to disagree; not every kid could do that and get away with it. I remember there were no official bed times, either. It was slightly irreverent and permissive parenting, in many ways.

Dad was never grumpy. He was very even-tempered. I can appreciate that now as a parent myself. But if he got annoyed with you, you knew all about it. That's when you might be in for a 'little chat'. Little chats could be quite long, very boring and tended to be born out of something he perceived as 'amoral'. Dad often talked about the 'moral code of being'.

I remember when I was about 14 I stayed out late at the Governor's cafe. When I got home, I realised I was in trouble and tried to wriggle my way out of it. I told Dad I'd been at a friend's house studying. That didn't work. This was, of course, a breach of the moral code that centred on honesty and integrity, and there was an expectation that I would behave accordingly. I'd been given the freedom, but the bargain was that I didn't lie.

However, my childhood wasn't all moral philosophy. Dad worked on two different speeds: the silly and the sensible. Nothing in-between! This serious professor to everyone else was, to us, the father who loved to play with his children. He's a funny guy. For years, he pretended to be the family pet; when the outside world wasn't looking, he would turn into a dog called Holden. In one of my earliest memories, I'm riding on Dad's back while he's pretending to be Holden. I'm about two and half, and I fall off.

This was a great gag when we were really little. Dog impersonation, among other things, became a form of torment when we got a bit older. He played all sorts of practical jokes on us. I guess he knew we could take it. Maybe picking me up from teenage parties in his pyjamas was pushing it a bit! That was truly embarrassing. I have never met anyone who cared less about clothes.

In our house, any subject was fair game – especially politics. Religion was another one that got people going. Dad was often confronted on his atheist views. Sometimes there would be heated discussions, people

Top left: Jim with baby Natalie. Top right: Natalie as a toddler. Centre: Natalie and her older brother, Victor. Above: In the mid-90s, Jim stood unsuccessfully for the Alliance Party – a (disputed) family story is that the billboard was deemed a distraction to motorists and had to be removed for safety.

Above: Natalie at George St Normal School in Dunedin. Above right: Professor Jim Flynn and wife Emily with Natalie on her capping day in 1991, after she graduated from Otago University with a psychology degree.

"She was always able to think outside the square. Natalie hates to see ideas presented as facts, and maybe she gets that from me."

shouting and doors slamming as they left, only to return 45 minutes later, continuing where they left off as they came through the front door and down the hall. Perhaps it was the university types. While people were passionate, they didn't seem to take things so personally back then.

Both my parents were quite radical; it was the civil rights movement that brought them together. They first met on a picket line in Washington DC. The story goes that Mum, trying to make conversation, asked Dad his views on mixed marriage. She got quite a lecture for even asking the question, but it worked, obviously. He was always an ardent socialist – still is. He even ran on the Alliance ticket once. I think it got quite close, but I don't know if he would have enjoyed trading academia for politics very much.

When I was about eight or nine, on a trip to America, Dad, Victor and I were on the New York subway and found a $10 bill. Dad wanted to hand it in to the police. 'Why?' we asked. 'No one's going to claim it!' But he insisted. We got a little chat on doing the right thing, and then went in search of a police station. That really sums up my father. Always the moral philosopher."

Jim, 85

"When Natalie was born, Emily was worried because she hadn't got on with her own mother, but I certainly didn't mind whether we had a boy or a girl. I told Victor, who must have been about five at the time, that his mum might have a monkey. He got very excited at the prospect, so he may have been slightly disappointed when Natalie turned up. Of course, Natalie and Emily turned out to be very close.

She was a very nice baby, with a considerable amount of anxiety, but that didn't last long. She became confident and very social. We had a very happy home back then when the children were little: it was a very stress-free time. Natalie had a really great sense of humour, everyone did, and there was lots of joking around in our house.

I remember Natalie had to find news stories for homework and present them to the class, so I used to help her out by looking for weird little items. With my assistance, she became the class reporter for a while. The kids loved her coverage on stories about the guy who knocked himself out while brushing his teeth or the lady that got eaten by her cat. Later, to our surprise, we found out the teacher thought our child had a rather strange sense of humour.

The $10 note incident on the subway does ring a bell. I don't remember spending all day looking for a police station – I think I handed the money to the conductor, who would have had a lost and found. The kids would very likely have got a talking to about what kind of world they wanted to live in, one in which they could trust people or one in which they couldn't.

It's not like I'd ever pick the kids up and give them a whacking or anything like that, but little chats did happen now and then when needed, though I seem to recall Victor was more the recipient of these than Natalie.

I always thought Natalie would go to university, but I didn't push her into psychology. That's something she got interested in during her teens. Unbeknown to Emily and me, she knocked on the door of a mental-health facility and became a volunteer helping people with mental disabilities. That's when she was still at school, maybe only 16. Natalie had a natural ability to communicate. She was curious about people, and seemed to welcome difference.

She was always able to think outside the square. Natalie hates to see ideas presented as facts, and maybe she gets that from me. Of course, that's what *Smart Mothering* was born out of. She sets out to separate myth from reality, and to tell the truth. Natalie knows how to do the research and interpret it with originality. It's a really well-written book.

I would like to think I've followed the truth in my life, and that I've handed this on to Natalie and Victor. I am very glad Natalie has empathy for others and her research is for a greater good. She was brought up in a household that believed your life wasn't worthwhile unless you benefited others as well as yourself.

I would have been disappointed if, let's say, she had become something like a lawyer who helped sell cigarettes in Africa." +