

His latest novel is better than his best-selling *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, Louis de Bernieres tells **Claire Scobie**



Photo: Fairfax

A LITTLE LESS MANDOLIN

LOUIS DE BERNIERES arrives clutching a copy of the erotic thriller *In the Cut* by Susanna Moore, for his session with the New York novelist on erotica at the Sydney Writer's Festival. "I've no idea what I'll say," he says. "The main problem with writing erotic scenes is the vocabulary is so limited and corny. One of my favourite ever sentences I found in one of those black-covered Mills and Boon books was something like, 'He thrust his proud manhood into her rich generosity.'" De Bernieres breaks into peals of laughter – so hard his belly quivers.

Wearing camel-coloured slacks, a cream shirt and dainty pearl cuff-links, de Bernieres, 49, is a self-confessed hedonist, with a cherubic face and twinkling blue eyes, prone to outbursts of searing wit and gleeful mirth. Even during one of his darker periods of writer's block, he once likened "the pressure of trying to write a second best-seller to standing in Trafalgar Square and being told to get an erection in the rush hour".

His best-known novel, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, is estimated to have boosted tourism to the Greek island of Cephalonia, where the novel is set, by 20 per cent. Since it was published a decade ago, more than three million copies have been sold, with translations in 24 languages.

Will *Birds Without Wings*, the novel he released on Thursday, match that success? "What, get an erection?" He laughs. "Yes. To begin with, I had a ghastly sense of fatalism that everybody was going to say it wasn't as good as *Corelli*. Now, I think it's probably better – although it may not be as cuddly or lovable."

Birds Without Wings, 10 years in the writing, is about the inhabitants of a Turkish town whose lives are shattered by the collapse of the Ottoman empire. Fascinated with the Turkish accounts of Gallipoli, de Bernieres trawled through the Ottoman archives for his primary sources written in French (the diplomatic language), and spent two weeks in Gallipoli, where his maternal grandfather had fought and been shot three times in one

day. Some 40 years later, still suffering from war wounds, his grandfather shot himself. "A late casualty of the war," says de Bernieres.

"Gallipoli was moving and made me feel very sad. Bones are coming to the surface everywhere and you have no idea whether they are French bones or Anzac bones, or British or Sikh. That makes you understand the fatuousness of nationalism because you can't tell the nationality of a bone. You can't tell if it is a Muslim or Christian, just a human bone."

While *Birds Without Wings* was not written as a modern fable, "it necessarily is a parable", he says, reflecting his hatred of "certainties, absolutism" and religious dogma. Parallels to what happened with the arbitrary carving up of the Ottoman empire can be drawn with "the break-up of ex-Yugoslavia, which is still causing movements of populations and what amounts to ethnic cleansing".

"There used to be this cliché that we are half beast and half angel. That's what I believe – there is innate goodness alongside our innate evil," he says. "The reason we create social order is to keep that evil under control, and war is all about the collapse of social order, and that's what brings out the evil."

De Bernieres grew up in a genteel village in Surrey, "in a generation where war was always talked about". His father, Piers, a poet, was in the army until around 1960 and his mother, Jean, served in the navy during the second world war. He was an "obstinate and wilful" child – traits he holds today – who read voraciously. After a public school education, he trained as an officer at Sandhurst, but only lasted four months – "I didn't want to be told what to do or tell anyone else what to do".

A pacifist much happier strumming Bob Dylan ballads on his guitar and writing poetry, he travelled to Colombia at the age of 18 to work as a teacher and part-time cowboy, before returning to study philosophy at Manchester University. His year in Latin America had a lasting impression. He wrote his first three novels in

the style of magical realism and remains obsessed by how "crazy megalomaniacs" – of which he'd seen plenty in Colombia – affect ordinary lives.

Aged 28, after a failed love affair, he wrote his first novella (still unpublished and "very embarrassing") and seven years later wrote his first novel, *The Way of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts*, after a motor-bike accident left him in plaster for six months. Two novels later, he was earning enough to give up supply teaching – "the most radical thing I did". In 1993, he was named as one of Granta's best young novelists of the year.

Then, "by happy accident" he stumbled across the history of Cephalonia when on holiday, and quickly became intrigued by the Italian and German occupations of the tiny Greek island. Despite wide literary acclaim, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, which won him the 1995 Commonwealth Writers Prize, caused a slow-burning controversy, upsetting Greek communists, who accused de Bernieres of misrepresenting them.

"It was a media problem cooked up by *The Guardian*," he says, a touch exasperated. "And then people on the far left started to get annoyed, and it's true the far left in Greece don't like me, but I don't like them either."

He has returned to Cephalonia since, without incident. The bickering continued during the making of the film of *Captain Corelli*, directed by John Madden, which de Bernieres was rumoured to dislike and received a critical panning. Today he says the cinematography is marvellous, but adds he would have preferred "a European art house film rather than a Hollywood blockbuster".

He is more candid in the session with Moore: "The reason for the sex scene in the film was because the director wanted to see the tits of Penelope Cruz. It was a legitimate aspiration to want to see them – I would have been pleased to see them myself – but I felt the sex scene destroyed the poignancy of the film."

De Bernieres accepts that *Birds Without Wings* may bring more criticism. "I'm trying

to offend everybody with perfect fairness, so it should be offensive to Turks, Greeks and Armenians."

Asked why it took 10 years to write a novel after *Captain Corelli*, he says: "I needed time for my style to evolve. It's no point in writing *Captain Corelli* twice. It was a difficult subject and the Turks are a guarded people and it takes a long time to get them to trust you."

He invented words for the novel – "Shakespeare did so I don't see why the rest of us can't" – and "nerdishly" combed the thesaurus, refining his Latinate prose. And, of course, he wasn't always writing.

In-between furious bursts he would garden, potter and – a consummate musical polymath – serenade Porthos, his cat, with his mandolin, lute, flute or clarinet playing. He also leisurely redecorated his Georgian rectory in Norfolk, where he moved a few years ago to stop "journalists doorstepping" him in London.

It's one of his few concessions to fame. The success of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* didn't come overnight, he says, but "was slow and steady". His millions provide the freedom to choose what to write and when (he had no contract for the latest until it was finished) but he still pootles

the country lanes in his veteran Morris Minor Traveller. "It's very strange to have enough money for the first time in your life," he says. "Instead of buying one good pair of quite expensive trousers you go and buy 10 cheap ones."

He says writing is "a pleasure... a compulsion that comes upon me, a useful form of obsessive madness, I suppose". When immersed in a novel, "you're in fairyland", he says, ruefully. "It can make you difficult to live with. Sometimes, I get very, very choked because of what happens to the characters. If I'm not emotionally involved how can you expect the reader to be?"

When he's finished a book, he says he feels a sense of bereavement, "as if you have lost all your friends". De Bernieres always shows the final manuscript to his partner, actress and director Cathy Gill, 32. "It is very important for writers to remember that actually their mum's opinion is just as important as theirs."

He has many books on the go – one about eccentric characters from the village he grew up in, a novella about a Yugoslavian girl working as a hostess in London, and a novel about the life of his paternal grandfather. De Bernieres says he wants to be remembered for taking the British novel out of north London and onto a world stage.

"I am quite conscious that I have readers in Brazil, in Denmark. I put little bits in *Birds Without Wings* which only the Turks or Greeks will be interested in."

The downside of that approach, he says, is that fans develop a distorted image of the writer. "People do think they know me. They think I am like Captain Corelli. After my first novel, everyone thought I was Don Emmanuel."

All the better, then, to get *Birds Without Wings* out so soon after *Red Dog*, his 2002 novella about a flatulent Australian canine? De Bernieres gives another high-pitched chortle before wandering off to his erotic literary soiree.

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Nicolas Cage and Penelope Cruz in the Hollywood adaptation of Louis de Bernieres' *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. The author – and audiences – weren't impressed