Frances Separovic
‘Bluestocking’ sees red about the media treatment of women
If it hadn’t been for the Whitlam Government abolishing university fees, Frances Separovic would not be where she is today – Head of Chemistry at the University of Melbourne and the first woman to occupy the position. In August she wowed the audience at the Blue-stocking Week event at the University of Melbourne with a witty and passionate account of her life. Carmel Shute reports.

Professor Separovic has notched up a number of firsts in her career – in 1996 she became the first woman reader in her department; in 2005 its first female professor; and, this year, was the first woman chemist to be elected to the Academy of Science. Her achievements are all the more remarkable since she never studied chemistry at university and comes from a first generation migrant working-class family in Broken Hill.

Frances Separovic was born in Yugoslavia in 1969, her father a miner and her mother a storekeeper. During her childhood, Broken Hill was a boom town, attracting new residents to work in the mines. Frances says of her early life, "I had to pretend I was working at night, not knowing what to do at the end of high school and my parents were disappointed I had become very restless at the CSIRO on my return. I saw a job as a senior lecturer/researcher in solid state Nuclear Magnetic Resonance at the University of Melbourne and applied, even though I didn’t know what a reader was. I managed to get the job without having ever studied chemistry at university level. It was a controversial decision and the head of department really had to stick his head out. Initially, there was some resentment from my colleagues but that’s all changed now."

Despite a life working in a predominantly male field, Frances has experienced relatively little direct prejudice. "What gets me is the ways the media treats women. It represents us as airheads. Young women think this is the way to be – they don’t think that being smart is something of which to be proud,' Frances says. 'Education gives you the potential to do a job you love doing. Generally it takes a young woman a long time to learn to value herself. To be paid to do something you love is wonderful. I feel so lucky.'

Frances has organised over 35 major scientific conferences and published 165 refereed papers in international journals. She was awarded the Robertson Medal by the Australian Society of Biophysics in 2009, the ANZMAG Medal in 2011 and elected Fellow of the Biophysical Society (USA) this year. A

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