# Naomi Klein: The making of a global activist

by Charlotte Gray photograph by Shannon Ross

The No Logo
author's new
book accuses
corporations and
governments of
profiting from
disaster. Watch
out, world:
Naomi Klein is
about to cause
another storm.

In 1991, an irate crowd of students surged into a meeting called by Hillel, the Jewish students' union at the University of Toronto, rallied by campus flyers that read "Emergency meeting on what to do about Naomi Klein." Most sported torn jeans and tees; many of the men wore yarmulkes. Their angry murmurs subsided as the president of Hillel rose to speak, holding the latest issue of *The Varsity*, the university newspaper.

In that issue, Naomi Klein, a 21vear-old liberal-arts student, had written a short article about Israel that not only demanded the end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, but connected the military violence of the Israeli army during the intifada with domestic violence within the country. It suggested that Israeli men were dealing with their own history as an oppressed people by oppressing others, including women and Palestinians. The article, "Victim to Victimizer," had sparked bomb threats against Klein and The Varsity offices. Most of the newspaper's print run was found buried in a dumpster. The Canadian Jewish Congress got involved, and debate spread into non-campus media such as The Canadian Jewish News.

In the middle of the fray, one particular student sat stony-faced, taking it all in – the charges of anti-Semitism, the slurs against *The Varsity*'s standards. She heard her

neighbour hiss: "If I ever meet this Naomi Klein, I'll kill her." Finally, palms damp with stage fright, and in a voice shaking with rage, she rose to her feet and announced, "I am Naomi Klein. And I am as much a Jew as every one of you."

While The Varsity published an apology, Klein refused to retract her accusations, either then or in the days of controversy that followed. At one point, she phoned the Toronto Star columnist Michele Landsberg, a Jewish peace activist and acquaintance of Klein's mother, to ask for advice on how to handle the row she had triggered. Landsberg laughs now as she remembers what she said: "I gave her rotten advice to keep quiet. Most of us were still defensive about Israel back then. Naomi was a Jewish peacenik ahead of her time."

Klein did not write about Israel again for a long time, but that did not stop her from authoring challenging pieces on other issues, such as sexual harassment. The Hillel incident was the final stage in the gestation of a young activist. She had perfected her modus operandi: From then on, she knew that if she looked at issues from unexpected angles and used sensational language, her words could sway opinion and enrage her opponents.

Sixteen years later, the 37-yearold Klein is recognized internationally as one of the boldest and > polemicists of her wered by fans as justice and a capitalism. Her Taking Aim at sold over one

# She exudes a cool wariness.

The New York

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At the same time, Klein is excomined by critics as a sophomoric thinker who refuses m agree that free trade and propended corporations have increased prosperity and lifted milions of people out of poverty. Her view of almost all governments as corrupt, and almost all corporate leaders as malevolent, drives her intellectual opponents nuts. "Why Naomi Klein needs to grow up," read the headline on a 2002 Economist article, which went on to describe the author as having the "incoherence and self-righteous disgust of the alienated adolescent." particular, the magazine deplored the way that Klein analyzes economic growth "not against real-world alternatives but against a Disneyesque utopia in which no poor person ever loses his job or chooses to work in a multinational factory at low wages."

Today, Naomi Klein has travelled far from campus newspapers and grungy jeans. When I meet

her in a Toronto café, I am struck by her cool wariness. Stiff-spined, elbows tight to her side, she clasps her hands and watches me intently. Polite and soft-voiced, she doesn't speak unless she has something to say. I can see she doesn't have the hunger for a megaphone that characterizes many crusading journalists. When we start talking about The Varsity incident, she leans forward, clasps her hands tightly together and betrays a surprising vulnerability. Klein flushes as she recalls: "The level of hatred was so intense. People flipped. I have never been so scared in my life." It was also uncomfortable because Klein found herself at the centre of the storm. "I prefer being the observer, the writer."

But her fear following The Varsity uproar did not persuade her to tone down the rhetoric. Klein never folds. Despite the relentless drumbeat of disagreement from critics for her left-of-centre perspective, she continues to court debate. This fall sees the publication of her new book, The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism, in which she describes how catastrophes such as war or hurricanes become opportunities for a vicious capitalism that privatizes everything in sight, bringing huge profits to some and misery for most of those on the ground. She draws a parallel between CIA prisoner-interrogation techniques and the technique used by the

startling and frightening thesis based, like No Logo, on Klein's intuition – and it reflects the style that Klein developed in her student days: to identify an issue before it becomes conventional wisdom, to locate evidence that fits her preconceived idea of what is at stake and to grab her readers with electrifying prose. Naomi Klein is extremely good at fleshing out an intriguing theory on what is happening in the world and whipping up public concern. However, her critics say, she is not as good at presenting informed analysis of how democracies work, what drives change and the dilemmas that policy-makers face as they try to balance human rights and economic growth.

Through it all, Klein's work reflects her passionate embrace of a clutch of "-isms" – radicalism, feminism, activism – that she spent her childhood rejecting.

"IF ANYONE HAD TOLD NAOMI'S CLASS-

mates, in her Montreal high school back in the 1980s, where she would be today, they wouldn't have believed you," Klein's brother, Seth, tells me, over the telephone from Vancouver. I had called to ask him what galvanized his sister into political action. I was already familiar with the Klein DNA: Seth and his sister are the children of two 1960s American radicals. Michael Klein and his wife, Bonnie Sherr Klein, came to Canada as resistors of the

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World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for imposing this "disaster capitalism" across the world, claiming that both use shock to induce loss of identity. It is a Vietnam War draft. He subsequently became a family physician who was active in Physicians for Social Responsibility here, while his wife continued work as a >

# Six degrees of Klein: How her world is connected. by Danielle Groen



**OPRAH** WINFREY In December 2003, Stephen Lewis brought Oprah Winfrey to Zambia to witness the growing AIDS crisis.

Oprah petitioned the United States Congress to establish a national database of convicted child abusers. In late 1993, President Bill Clinton signed the "Oprah Bill" into law.



STEPHEN LEWIS Avi Lewis's father is the noted author and former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa.



TOMMY DOUGLAS NDP leader Tommy Douglas summoned Stephen Lewis home from Africa in 1961 to help manage the political campaign of his father, David Lewis.

BONO

activist Stephen Lewis "an

extraordinary and relentless one-man band for the world's most poor and vulnerable."

**Bono** took the lyrics for the U2 song "The Ground Beneath Her Feet" from

Salman Rushdie's novel of

the same name.



grandfather of actor Kiefer Sutherland, who was passed over for the role of the former premier in CBC's mini-series Prairie Giant: The Tommy Douglas Story.



KEVIN BACON Kiefer Sutherland starred with Kevin Bacon in the 1990 thriller Flatliners, about a team of medical students who explore near-death experiences.



COLIN FIRTH In Atom Egoyan's Where the Truth Lies, Kevin very personal with

Colin Firth played the bumbling Mark Darcy in Bridget Jones's Diary, appearance by novelist Salman Rushdie.





Bacon gets up close and co-star Colin Firth.

which featured a cameo

SALMAN RUSHDIE In the 2005 Global Public Intellectuals Poll, compiled by the British Prospect Magazine, Salman Rushdie was ranked tenth - just one spot ahead of



NAOMI KLEIN

Journalist, activist

BILL CLINTON Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis's 2004 film, The Take, follows Argentinian auto workers who take over their plant; the film includes archival footage of Bill Clinton.





Naomi Klein, the highest-ranking woman on the list.

In Montreal, Seth and Naomi grew up in a Birkenstock-and-granola household: Holidays were road trips into the Canadian wilderness, with a canoe strapped to the car roof. I also knew that, as a teenager, Naomi embodied the rebel gene

without the progressive values. In Bonnie Klein's carefully chosen words, "She was a very challenging

child to raise: She was always asking questions. She was never convinced you could have a real impact on issues." Seth, two years older than Naomi, happily joined his parents on protest marches and is today the British Columbia director of the left-wing Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. His sister, however, snarled at all that stuff:>

feminist filmmaker, best known for the searing 1981 anti-pornography documentary Not A Love Story. The family tradition began with Michael's father, an American who organized a strike while working as an animator for Walt Disney; he was later blacklisted after refusing to testify on leftist activities before Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Naomi objected to being "a prop," dragged along to marches. She was profoundly unmoved by trips to folk festivals ("so boring"). And she was deeply irritated by Bonnie's feminist friends. "I was a private kid, and I was bothered by their exhibitionism and hippie-dippy instant intimacy."

She preferred, as she wrote in *No Logo*, to be a typical North American teen, living a life of Big Macs and Lacoste sports shirts. "There were no jeans tight enough, no peroxide powerful enough, no eyeliner electric enough" for this no-holds-barred Girl.

But the rebellion came to an abrupt end in 1987, with an event that hit her family like an earthquake. Bonnie Sherr Klein, then 46, suffered two debilitating strokes and was close to death for weeks. Naomi dropped out of school: The bratty 17-year-old became a concerned daughter as her mother inched her way to recovery.

Once Bonnie's condition stabilized, Klein left home to study English and philosophy at the University of Toronto. She enrolled at University College, determined to make an impact with writing. She was soon reporting for The Gargoyle, the college's newspaper, and by the end of her first year was the paper's editor. John Montesano, then editor of York University's The Lexicon, watched this firstyear student "produce more pages, more news. She was ambitious for change. In a crowd of young people trying to figure out who they were, she was a natural leader."

One issue, in particular, galvanized Klein. On December 6, 1989, she sat cross-legged on the floor of a friend's dorm room, mesmerized by a horrific scene unfolding on a small black-and-white television. Gunman Marc Lépine had gone on a rampage at the Université de Montréal's École Polytechnique:

He had shot 14 women, then turned the gun on himself. He had told his prey, "You're all a bunch of fucking feminists."

Klein and three girlfriends stared in shock at the coverage, then turned to each other and exchanged emotional stories of being victims of male violence. As she later wrote in an essay, she also asked herself, "How could I have been so blind?" Rewinding the tape of her teenage years, Klein decided that much of her wilful girliness (which included an eating disorder) was "self-hatred." The Montreal massacre did what Klein's own family had failed to do: It radicalized her.

But how should she channel the frantic anger that erupted? She had to capture the whole event in words. Klein called Montesano about co-producing a special supplement on the event for both *The Gargoyle* and *The Lexicon*. Seth Klein considers this her awakening. "She came to activism through journalism: What she reported roused her sense of social justice."

The Gargoyle was Klein's launch pad; soon she was writing for The Varsity, where most of her articles dealt with the student politics of the time. Today they read like a handbook of political correctness. Klein was young, zealous and saw prejudice everywhere. Men were the enemy. There were polemics about the university's investment policies, and the need for less-hierarchical teaching methods. She even wrote an essay (that she later called excessive) arguing that heterosexual couples should never make love in the missionary position, since this was "the physical embodiment of patriarchy."

### AS I WATCH KLEIN CLASP TWO HANDS

around a cup of oolong tea in the Toronto café, I realize one reason why she seems tense and defensive. After *The Varsity* article on Israel,

she dropped out of university to work as an intern at The Globe and Mail. She never finished her university degree. Does she regret that? Klein locks eyes with me. "It's an easy shot from my critics, sure. I didn't feel it so much after No Logo. People liked the idea that the author was a quirky young rebel who had dropped out. But for The Shock Doctrine, it's a gimme for right-wing economists who will do anything they can to avoid taking me seriously – because I'm a woman, I'm not an economist, I didn't finish school. My challenge now is to focus the debate on the issues, not me personally. I know I'm solid on the facts."

So why didn't she finish her degree? Simply put, things got in the way. First, she was invited to remain with *The Globe and Mail* to

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help cover the 1993 federal election campaign. Leaning back in the café's easy chair, she grins as she recalls what the 1993 election meant for her own life. She had read that MuchMusic's political reporter, Avi Lewis, had told Jean Charest (then a Conservative minister, and now premier of Quebec), "You're too cute to be a Tory," and then ruffled his hair. Jealousy of Lewis's cheeky approach shot through Klein. "I was only 24, and I was stuck in the stodgy old Globe," she says with a smile. "I thought, I gotta meet this guy. So I set up an interview with him." >

From the moment, shortly thereafter, that they started hanging out, "it was a permanent intellectual engagement," says Lewis. Like Klein, Lewis himself comes from an activist dynasty. His mother is Michele Landsberg; his father is Stephen Lewis, AIDS crusader and former NDP politician; his grandfather, David Lewis, was a founder and the second leader of the NDP. In 1997, Avi Lewis and Klein celebrated their marriage in the garden of Bonnie and Michael Klein's new home in Roberts Creek, on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast.

By that time, Klein had made one more attempt to get that elusive academic qualification. In 1995, after two years as editor of the lefty This Magazine, she returned to the University of Toronto, where she discovered that student activists were taking a keen interest in the behaviour of multinational corporations within the global economy. One day she walked into a campus washroom and discovered ads for Pizza Pizza and Chrysler Neon on the cubicle doors. Then she heard about a creative group of "culture-jamming" students who, fed up with the way corporations were now allowed to invade their campuses, were either removing the posters or replacing them with art prints. The campaign was witty and subversive - a new kind of protest.

Klein had to position herself ahead of the crowd, just as she had done with *The Varsity* article on Israel. Rachel Giese, a Toronto journalist who worked at *The Varsity* with Klein, says, "She has a sixth sense of what is going to happen." She began to look at companies like Nike, McDonald's and Wal-Mart, and was soon so busy travelling to places like the Philippines to investigate Third World sweatshops that she wasn't

able to keep up attendance at university seminars.

No Logo was published in 2000. Other critics had covered some of the ground, but Klein was the first to produce an all-encompassing and accessible analysis of the effects of brand-building. Companies such as Nike or Calvin Klein were no longer marketing sneakers or jeans: They were promoting the idea that their products were "cool" and they were selling "cool" globally. As their logos took over the world, their corporate practices (international mergers, franchising and outsourced production) were

undermining civil liberties and national identities.

"Naomi was very savvy in the way she got it," says Giese. "She saw that the anti-globalization movement was going to be a defining movement." The book became the movement's manifesto as protests erupted outside the Summit of the Americas free-trade meetings in Quebec City. The phrase "no logo" passed instantly into the language. The book was "an intellectual coup," acknowledged economist Martin Wolf, a senior editor for London's *Financial Times*, though he also described it as "arrogant,"

#### KLEIN ON KLEIN: Rituals, idols and what she's reading now.



#### What's your morning ritual?

Hyper music, usually Latin American hip hop. Sit-ups, push-ups, two mugs of coffee.

#### What's on your bedside table right now?

Jane Smiley's *Good Faith* [a novel about seduction and the '80s real-estate boom] and Stephanie Nolen's *28* [portraits of AIDS sufferers in Africa – one for each of the million Africans living with the disease].

# What do you need to get through the day? Three mugs of coffee, one chance to

Where do you shop for clothes?
Everyone knows activists wear sackcloth.

#### What's your guiltiest indulgence?

check email.

Veronica Mars episodes on DVD – but they cancelled the show!

# What did you do to celebrate finishing your latest book?

It was 5 a.m. Avi and I popped champagne, blasted Al Green, then collapsed.

## What's your most vivid memory of Baghdad?

The flocks of birds. They would fly in the most erratic patterns, as if shell-shocked.

#### What do you pack for Baghdad?

[The flower-essence tonic] Rescue Remedy and the cell number of Michael Ratner, board president of the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York.

# Who's the person you'd call from jail? See above.

Which person has intimidated you the most? I used to be incredibly intimidated by my book editor and publisher, Louise Dennys, because she is so brilliant and has edited so many literary titans [including Michael Ondaatje].

## Who do you think people need to pay more attention to?

Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia. He is trying to build a new kind of participatory democracy, drawing on indigenous traditions. The experiment is well worth watching.

## What's the best piece of advice you've been given?

[Scientist and activist] Ursula Franklin said, "We know how bad things are, so stop proving it. We need you to tell us, What are we going to do about it?"

by Danielle Groen

paranoid and wrong," and accused Klein of making a spurious connection between "the dissatisfaction of the spoiled children of the West" and the "ills of global inequality, corporate power and environmental degradation."

Within days of its publications, sales took off. From the 22 countries Klein visited during her book tour, she filed evewitness accounts of anti-globalization struggles and initiatives to publications as varied as the Los Angeles Times and Britain's Guardian Weekly. These articles were published in 2002 in her second book, Fences and Windows. At this stage, Klein could have surfed along on her No Logo reputation, turning up on every talk show as a spokesperson for the left. Instead, she and Avi Lewis disappeared for a year to Argentina to work together on filming The Take, a documentary about the workerdriven movement to take over bankrupt factories there.

All the while, according to Klein's husband, "the success of *No Logo* put Naomi under the stress of coming up with another Big Idea. She puts a lot of pressure on herself to be original, and she had to find another strong thesis to advance."

IN MARCH 2004, KLEIN TRAVELLED TO Baghdad to explore how Iraqis felt about their country being sold off to U.S. corporations such as Bechtel and ExxonMobil. At her hotel, she met an Irish peace activist who told her bluntly that Iraqis were too focused on survival to argue economic theory. As if to drive that point home, the conversation was interrupted when, suddenly, a massive fireball exploded beyond the window. Klein grabbed her shoes and ran down five flights of stairs into the lobby, which was strewn with glass shards. A hotel round the corner had been flattened by a 1,000-pound bomb. Most people would have fled the scene: Klein was there, notebook at the ready.

She had visited Iraq with the idea of writing a short book about what had gone wrong there. But the devastation she witnessed seeded a bigger idea. Appalled at the way the Americans were handling reconstruction in post-invasion Iraq, Klein decided to look at other places hit by catastrophe. In July 2005, she travelled to Sri Lanka to see how that country was recovering from the most devastating natural disaster in recent memory—the December 2004 tsunami.

On a deserted beach, she met Roger, a local fisherman, repairing a tangled red net. He told her that the tsunami had destroyed fishermen's boats and huts. Then, as Klein discovered, international consultants had come along, declaring the newly pristine beach was the perfect site for a "tourism zone." As a result, the government in Colombo was channelling all the funds donated for tsunami relief into transforming Roger's humble hometown into a high-end resort. Tsunami victims such as Roger and his family, who had fished off this beach for generations, were forbidden to rebuild their huts. "'Reconstruction," fumes Klein in The Shock Doctrine, "meant nothing less than the deliberate destruction of their culture and way of life and the theft of their land."

Klein's travels reinforced a darker, more ambitious theory about the unholy alliance between the American government, international institutions like the World Bank and multinational corporations all over the globe. She decided that these organizations were intent on "erasing and remaking the world" by the way they exploited disasters. She has applied her thesis to all the catastrophes and economic meltdowns of the past three decades, from Argentina to Sri Lanka. She

first used the phrase "disaster capitalism" in an article on post-tsunami Asia. By the time hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the term hit a nerve – and like "no logo," it became a media cliché.

# "She is a rallying point."

sixteen years after the Hillel furor, Klein is now aware, as her brother puts it, that "in this line of work, if you don't get a reaction, you're not doing your job." But with her new book, Klein will find herself on the defensive. The Shock Doctrine, published almost simultaneously in 11 languages, takes on much bigger targets than the brand culture she skewered in No Logo.

This time, she goes after the world's most powerful players, from the U.S. government to the Russian oligarchs. The link Klein makes between the CIA's use of shock therapy and multinational corporations' tactics during global disasters will ignite blistering controversies. So will her casual assumption that international bodies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund work handin-hand with the Bush-Cheney leadership in Washington.

William Watson, a *National Post* columnist who teaches at McGill University, compares Klein to the filmmaker Michael Moore and says she is "an extremely articulate opponent who is often more effective" than traditional economists. "She is a rallying point for those who are concerned that people get hurt by the tumultuous process of capitalism. Her critique might be simplistic and monochrome."

but it is also telling and should be answered. It will be widely read, because she is a force to be reckoned with."

# What will be her next Big Idea, for the world and for herself?

As I watch Klein tuck a lock of chestnut hair behind her ear and earnestly lay out her ideas, I recognize her brilliant sense of timing. With the build-up of international anger against President Bush, I can see that there is a widening readership for a polemic that casts global decision-makers in the worst possible light. And thanks to the globalization Klein so distrusts, she has an audience far beyond Canada.

Google Klein, and nearly one million references flash up, plus comments like, "Beauty and brains, a lethal combo, [signed] Leftofleft." On YouTube, you can catch dozens of videos of her - cool and articulate - as she talks to interviewers and speaks at conferences. The Leftofleft Internet generation embraces Klein's ideological certainty, and the way she extrapolates, from a series of disasters and policy mistakes, a general theory of global corruption. She speaks their language, about issues they care about - the need for universities to resist corporate power, the importance of challenging Republican America's values, the importance of dealing with Third World poverty.

What will be her next Big Idea, for the world and for herself? When I ask her if she might enter electoral politics, she rears back: "I don't think I could have enough impact." What about a child? She pauses, reflecting the indecision facing any 37-year-old who is torn between professional and biological goals. "I'm open to that," she allows. But motherhood would be a big leap for a woman whose passion is bouncing along the rutted back roads of the undeveloped world, filling note-books with outrage.

Last May, however, she did tick one item off her to-do list. She travelled to Halifax to receive an honorary doctorate from King's College. "I'll have a couple of letters after my name just in time for publication," she says with a grin. Best of all, William Barker, the university's president and vice-chancellor, presented her with a King's baseball cap. This distinguished academic had himself laboriously picked the college logo off the cap. •