

LESLIE KENTON

Pioneering health and beauty editor of *Harpers & Queen* (*The Daily Telegraph*)

Leslie Kenton, who has died aged 75, was a dynamic and hugely respected health and beauty writer whose holistic approach to her subject broke new ground. Through her articles for *Harpers & Queen* in the 1970s and '80s, and books such as the bestselling *Raw Energy*, she introduced thousands of readers to ideas which then seemed eccentric, from Pilates and juicing to the importance of organic food.

A classic blonde beauty herself, she was the best possible advertisement for the lifestyle she advocated, radiating serenity, confidence and enthusiasm. Few who met her could have guessed that she was the product of an appallingly dysfunctional family, whose shortcomings she chronicled in an extraordinary memoir, *Love Affair* (2010). Its main focus was her father, the celebrated American bandleader Stan Kenton, with whom she claimed to have had an incestuous relationship. Despite this, she saw parenthood as the most fulfilling thing in life, and in no way regretted having four children by four different men.

Leslie Kenton was born at the Queen of Angels Hospital, Los Angeles on 24th June 1941. Her arrival was not entirely welcome: her jazz-pianist father was about to start touring with his first band, into which he had sunk every last cent; her mother, Violet, lived for beauty and glamour and was horrified by the messiness of child-rearing. As a result, Leslie spent her early years in the care of Violet's mother – a disciplinarian whose friends included L. Ron Hubbard, the inventor of Scientology. Not until her father's success allowed him to buy a house in the Hollywood hills did she experience something approaching normal family life; but while her parents entertained showbusiness stars such as Nat King Cole and Ronald Reagan, her one companion was a collie called Tuffy – who, she said, taught her the meaning of love.

Accompanying her parents on tour did nothing to lessen her sense of insecurity. The pressure of running a large band pushed Stanley Kenton towards drugs and alcohol, and in 1949 Violet left him. Leslie Kenton now only saw her father on occasional holidays, and during one of these – she alleged in *Love Affair* – he raped her. She was eleven; the abuse continued for three years. Eventually she suffered a breakdown, and was subjected to electroconvulsive therapy which blotted out her memory of her ordeal for twenty years. Yet she refused entirely to condemn the relationship, describing it as ‘wondrous and horrific’, and dedicating the memoir to her father ‘with all my love’.

At 17, during her first year at Stanford University, she befriended and became pregnant by a medical student, Peter Dau. Though not in love, she agreed to marry him. With their son, Branton, they moved to New York – where Kenton studied Russian and worked as a model – before separating in 1962. Almost immediately, she found herself pregnant again, following a brief liaison with a family friend, Barry Comden (who would later marry Doris Day). This time the child was a girl, Susanna.

Moving to Paris, Kenton embarked on her second marriage, to Dan Smith, a journalist; their son Jesse was born in 1965.

It was the break-up of this relationship five years later, and the need to earn a living, that set Kenton on her writing career. By this time the family had settled in England, where a brief though promising career as an actress had been scotched by work-permit difficulties. Her first paid article was on heavy-lifting gear for *Industrial Management* magazine.

In 1974 she was invited to become beauty editor of *Harpers & Queen* – but, believing that beauty came from within, she insisted that health be included in her remit. She held the position for thirteen years, gaining a reputation for meticulous research: she buried herself in the *Lancet* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and consulted experts such as the Nobel Prize-winner

Linus Pauling. At the same time she was fascinated by alternative therapies, from shamanism to transcendental meditation.

Above all, she argued that food and nutrition were the cornerstone of healthy living. Her books *The Joy of Beauty* (1976), *Raw Energy* (with her daughter Susanna, 1984) and *Ultrahealth* (also 1984) were among the first to highlight the negative effects of fast food, excessive animal fats and a sedentary lifestyle, emphasising instead the benefits of exercise, raw food and high-potency vitamins and minerals. She wrote over 40 books in all, including a ‘spiritual thriller’ about Beethoven entitled *Ludwig*.

She transcended fashion, dressing for the office entirely in white (offset by her Porsche, which was black). Part earth mother and part canny businesswoman, she acted as a consultant both to Greenpeace and to Estée Lauder, for whom she developed the Origins skincare range. She was kind and generous to those who worked for her, encouraging them to fulfil their potential by moving outside their comfort zone.

Her home life was divided between a flat in Primrose Hill and a fisherman’s cottage in Pembrokeshire, where she rose at 4am to meditate and run on the beach. It was here that her fourth child, Aaron, was born, with his three siblings standing by. (She was uncharacteristically reluctant to name his father, whom she had met through work.) A strong believer in natural childbirth, she shocked some by encouraging mothers to eat their own placentas; hers had to be fetched back from the fridge so that the midwife could examine it.

In 1998 she moved to New Zealand, where she and her son Aaron developed a programme for natural weight loss and personal growth, Cura Romana. She died at home on 13th November 2016 surrounded by her family.