

You are not only a critically acclaimed novelist but also a renowned film producer and scriptwriter.

They are different ways of creating stories but is there one direction you prefer?

I'm hardly renowned but thanks for the compliment. When it comes to the creation of a story, there is no difference (for me) in being a novelist or a screenwriter. You fashion a premise, often based on a snippet of a true story, and then weave it through the generation of characters, all the while having George Orwell hovering over you with his 'Why I Write' - in other words, 'what am I actually trying to say here, with this story, these people, this locale, these themes?' Of course, as the idea begins to formulate, differences do begin to kick in. But they are mainly to do with the process. When we develop a story for film or TV we do it through a story conference. Thus the collaborative nature of film and TV occurs with like-minded writers and story editors contributing their ideas. As a novelist, I am sitting at home twisting in the wind trying to sort out the character wants and desires, talking to myself like a madman and going for long walks or procrastinating over a slow cooked ratatouille. In a story conference I am at a table surrounded by people more clever than I (which is why I hired them) non-stopping in ideas and scenes. But, as a scriptwriter, after that joyous time, I am back to myself. The actual process of writing, be it a novel or a screenplay, is shrouded in isolation. It's just you and the page, the characters often mocking you as they take over from a pre-ordained sense of direction. Personally, I don't prefer one or the other. I love to work with talented people, being dazzled by their ideas but I also do love the solitary experience where it's just me and the words we choose. (And if there is one massive difference in all of this, it's in the value of words; words in a novel replace performance and editing and cinematography. Words are your weapons of seduction.) When I write novels I do not pre-plot. I have no defined clue where I'm going. I probably have some idea of the end but it's hazy and, unlike in visual narrative entertainment, resolution is not necessarily a big player. This is totally different to when I write scripts and when I produce other writers. In film and TV we are working to a story outline that lists all the beats and scenes and charts the character trajectories. In novel-writing, it's a free-for-all, guided totally by my instincts. (For instance, am I sick of this voice? Let's shift this character off-screen for a while, that sort of thing.)

You are about to publish your fifth novel in BLOOD RIVER. Has your writing process changed over the years?

The writing process is very largely defined by your domestic circumstances and I have been blessed to have been with people who have allowed me the space to essentially depart planet earth for an inordinately long time with no clear return home date. It's no coincidence that I wrote my first novel soon after my marriage came to an end and I was living alone. It requires a staggering amount of patience and generosity of spirit to live with a novelist. And of course, it requires the novelist to emerge from planet book every now and then to acknowledge this. For me, over the span of the five novels, the process hasn't changed. The locale has. Promise was written in a dodgy Gold Coast motel, Dead Girl, Train

Rider and Kingdom were written in the middle of a huge wooden-floored room in a tumbling-down old Queenslander in Southport and Blood River has been written in my new wonderful house in Five Dock, Sydney.

Can you tell us about a typical writing week? Do you write at home or are you a writer who needs to get out of the house?

I get up at four in the morning and read newspapers and journals online, from all over, making sure I am getting stories and points of view from more than just the Western press. I start to write about six. I may write non-stop for six hours or more or, if I get stuck or bored, I'll go read a book. I read about two or three books a week. Around midday or early afternoon I'll sleep on the couch for about half an hour and then I'll go back to writing or move on to producing issues. I have a new film and TV company. I don't need to get out of the house and I'll often stay holed up inside for days on end. I do like to write long-hand and enjoy writing in pizza or Indian restaurants. Sometimes I'll write up to 3,000 words a day. Sometimes I'll write two. One day I achieved one. I don't care. I know that authors have said you have to achieve a word count (between 1,000 to 3,000) a day but if I am lying on the couch watching *The Bridge* or *Home Ground* or a Thai horror movie or reading the latest *New Yorker*, I am working.

Can you tell us a little about BLOOD RIVER?

I've always been fascinated by the idea of the doppelganger, ever since I read Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* when I was a kid. (I didn't get out much.) So I wanted to explore the notion of a person going to jail for some serious murders which they say they didn't commit and say this again and again and very loudly. Proclaiming their innocence to the parole board who, to even begin considering parole, have to hear that the prisoner is in fact guilty of the crimes and then, let's start talking about atonement and recidivism and rehabilitation and support systems.... Saying you are innocent will keep you in jail. You have to be guilty before they will even begin to think about parole. Thus Jen, one of our lead characters, has to become the killer. She has to absorb all that he did and walk in his shoes and target then kill those victims who she claims she didn't hurt. Only then, once she has become this monster, will she be allowed free. I guess it's got a bit of *Catch 22* in it. I did quite a bit of research on the process of parole which is not exactly like how it's dramatized in the movies and was guided through this process by an ex-president of a parole board here in Australia.

So, once Jen is out on parole and there's a passage in the book where she 'releases' the killer from inside her after having a bath at her sister's house, I then wanted to switch over and get into the head of the actual killer. He is now free to kill again because while Jen has been incarcerated for his crimes, he has been protected; now that she is free, he is also free, to kill once more and let her take the blame, this time deliberately, for his murder.

(Or maybe it's all in her head? Maybe the doppelganger is a figment of her imagination as a way to achieve freedom.)

I was keen to explore numerous voices (originally I had seventeen!) in the telling of the story, a bit like in Robert Altman's *Nashville* or EL Doctorow's *Ragtime* and different points of view but we now are mostly focused on Lara, Jen, her sister Anthea, Karin, the head of the parole board and finally, the only significant male voice in the book, Billy. Going back to Robert Altman, I was deeply moved by his movie, *Three Women*, from the 1970's and I guess this was also an influence for me. I love the framework that the crime genre provides me in exploring characters, where they come from, what their dreams are and where they may end up.

Your previous novels focused on Darian Richards, a male ex-homicide cop. *Blood River* is a relentlessly gripping novel that introduces a very strong and believable female detective, Lara Ocean.

Where did you find the inspiration for Lara's character?

Lara comes from few inspirations. I read Han Suyin's five volume autobiography a few years ago and was struck by the challenges she wrote about having a European dad and a Chinese mum. Additionally I have a number of friends and colleagues who are Chinese Australian young women and we have been developing a few film and TV dramas which explore this cross-cultural experience. I first came across the 'left-over' syndrome some years ago when teaching Chinese students at Griffith Uni. Since then I've been to China a number of times and forged some friendships to get a better understanding of their culture. The influences of Maoism and Confucianism. I also spent some time living in Thailand and got to observe the Buddhist approach to life. So all of this started to coalesce when I began to think about Lara. I've written about sexism and racism in the Queensland police before (not that they hold the exclusive corner to this) and wanted to explore this area even more. (In other words, not through a lead male character.) Lara is also influenced by the reminiscences of my ex-Homicide advisor, Lucio and the stories of his early days on the job. I was also intrigued by the idea of having a very young homicide detective working a massive case, along with an older, jaded mentor and then coming back to her twenty years later, as the Commissioner of Police, which provided me with a good framework for her self-reflection, not only with the murder case that forms the core of the story but in her journey as a daughter and friend.

My previous novels have been rather muscular in that they work around Darian, Casey and Isosceles as the driving forces (with Maria a bit of a side-kick) and they were heavily influenced by the Raymond Chandler loner hero character, so it was terrific to be writing for a female lead character and spreading the points of view. Nearly all of my earlier writing has been anchored around women characters, from Annie in *Father*, played by Carol Drinkwater, to Georgie Parker's character in *Fire* and Lindy Chamberlain in *Through My Eyes*, played by Miranda Otto. My new film and TV company (which is me and three young Chinese women) has a mission statement which aims to promote diverse voices and especially strong female characters. So Darian has been a bit of an anomaly for me. (Albeit a most delightful one.)

Which writers inspire you?

Roberto Bolano, David Foster Wallace, Flannery O'Connor, Damon Runyon, Graham Greene, Han Kang, Max Hastings, Raymond Chandler, Herodotus, Han Suyin, Haruki Murakami, Kevin Kwan, Margaret Millar, John Le Carre, Ross Macdonald, John D McDonald, Coleridge, James Lee Burke, Guy De Maupassant, Gina Apostel, Iris Chang, Yotam Ottolenghi and Madhur Jaffrey.

The other huge inspirations are Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, Fritz Lang, William Goldman, Stanley Kubrick and Akira Kurosawa.