

**Can you tell us a little bit about the genesis of *Call Me Evie*? What was the inspiration for the setting and characters?**

If you looked at a map and slid your finger around the Bay of Plenty on the east coast of New Zealand, it might catch on a jag right in the centre. This is Maketu. This is my inspiration: a place that is beautiful, rugged, and alive with stories. Only the locals stick around through winter, although keen surfers from Rotorua might venture over on the weekends. I remember Maketu as a place where the locals grow quiet when strangers approach, dogs are free to roam the street, and solemn figures watch the beach from their cars with tall bottles of beer and their beanies pulled low over their eyes. It's not the most welcoming of places. I recall one trip when, as we were leaving town, a group of young boys hurled stones, chipping our windscreen. We climbed out of the car to chase them, but they didn't run, they simply picked up more stones and continued throwing them, this time at us. Disconcerted and with our tails firmly between our legs we dropped back into the car and sped off. I just remember thinking: *this would be the perfect place to hide out*. So that's Maketu, then there is Kate. Kate has been with me for years. To me she embodies the contradiction of the archetypal inner Melbourne native, that is to be at once outwardly cool and indifferent, yet introspective and neurotic. I know it's cliché to say but if I didn't write her story she would still haunt me. So to get rid of her, I sent her to Maketu and gave her something to run from. I wrote in this way, a hypothetical – what if Kate was in Maketu? How would she get there? Why would she be there and with who?

**There has been a resurgence of Australian crime and thriller writing. What drew you to this genre when writing *Call Me Evie*?**

I believe that in today's publishing environment the first task of the writer is to keep the reader from picking up their phone or turning on Netflix. My favourite books effortlessly consume entire afternoons. This is why I love literary thrillers and suspense novels. They can offer a pacey gripping read that most readers won't feel guilty indulging, particularly if there is more beneath the surface of the story. My favourite crime novels don't rely exclusively on twists or tension, but they have *voice*, prose that crackles, characters that are developed and, something that is often overlooked, a setting so alive that it grows outward from the page. Australian crime is increasing in popularity off the back of the distinctive settings available to writers here.

**The majority of *Call Me Evie* is told from the first-person perspective of the main character. How did you go about creating Kate/Evie? What techniques did you use to get inside her mind?**

I don't think I can claim to have 'created' Kate as strange as that might sound. Kate seemed to just exist, but that's not to say I didn't spend a lot of time trying to understand her. My greatest fear was that the voice in this novel would be inauthentic, so I went to great lengths to make sure this didn't happen. For eighteen months, almost every book I read was either about a young woman or narrated by a young woman. I took so much from books like *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* by Eimear McBride to Garner's *Monkey Grip*, and *The Girl Before* by Rena Olsen. That was the first thing, the second thing I did was I got to know the character of Kate better than I knew anyone. We had parallels: we both lost our mother's young and never really talked to anyone about it, we are both introverts wearing the clothes of

extroverts, we both have endured manic episodes. But still that wasn't enough because I found myself imposing my personality on Kate. She was becoming me which I didn't want because I'm too boring to do some of the things she does. The longer I worked on this novel, the more the pendulum swung back and instead Kate began to *inhabit* me. For a short period, I shaved my legs and wore tights, in one scene Kate's head is shaved so for the first time in my life I shaved my head to feel all the sensations, the way the clippers caught, that magical tingling when I first stepped beneath the shower. I also briefly kept a journal, writing as Kate purely as an exercise in understanding her better. My wife, other than being concerned about what this project was doing to my psyche, took it upon herself to help me more. I was never a young woman growing up in Melbourne's inner suburbs so there were things I could never understand without her help. These could be things like first crushes, what swimming lessons were like as a girl, how did she feel texting boys and going to parties, and what was her first driving lesson like – all things that inform my vision of Kate.

**Who are your writing influences? What books were on your beside table while you were writing *Call Me Evie*?**

Imagine a Venn diagram where one circle is 'influence style and prose' and the other circle is 'influenced plot and narrative' and you're likely to find only three books in the cross section: *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn, *Room* by Emma Donahue and *All the Birds, Singing* by Evie Wyld. Looking back, these were the books that most influenced *Call Me Evie*. Developing as an author I was hugely influenced by Cormac McCarthy, David Mitchell, Helen Garner, J.M. Coetzee. Throughout the three or so years I worked on *Evie*, there were other books that spent a great deal of time on my writing desk such as *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, *Before I Go to Sleep* by S.J. Watson, *The Natural Way of Things* by Charlotte Wood, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman, *The Girl Before* by Rena Olsen and *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* by Eimar McBride.

**You also have a podcast *On Writing*, where you interview writers. What do you think is the best question to ask an author? And how would you answer it?**

That's a great question. My philosophy is to try to get guests to tell me something they've never told another interviewer. A good question to open up the conversation is *what was the most surprising thing you found writing this book?* To which I would answer: I was surprised by how close I grew to my characters, even the 'bad guys.' When you spend so much time getting inside the heads of these characters they become like your family which makes it harder to do anything bad to them but a story in which no one faces any hardship or adversity would be rather boring and in psychological thrillers it tends to be a really bad thing that kicks things off. One scene toward the end of the book I cried the first time I wrote it, I just couldn't push through without feeling a yawning pit of sadness open up inside. I remember thinking, *what the hell is wrong with you? It's not real, you made these people up in your head.* I text my agent letting her know that I teared up writing it, which had never happened and I didn't think *could* happen. I felt a little better when my US publisher emailed me weeks later saying she had cried at the same scene.

**Can you tell us a little bit about what you are working on next?**

With *Call Me Evie*, I relied upon the expertise of a leading Australian psychologist, Dr Marion Barton, to get certain aspects of the book right. Through this same contact, I was introduced to a former child member of a Victorian cult. After a deeply troubling two hour recorded interview (facilitated by Marion), I began to feel I couldn't write an article or non-fiction account of her experience, I didn't feel qualified to tell her story. So I went back to what I knew best in writing fiction, inspired by her strength in escaping the cult, I formed the basis for my next novel about a Victorian cult near Warrandyte, Victoria. It's a tense psychological suspense novel, and once again I'm aiming to interrogate the human psyche and the biases in the brain that lead us to hurt each other. I'm currently in the process of editing it and I'm absolutely loving where I am at.