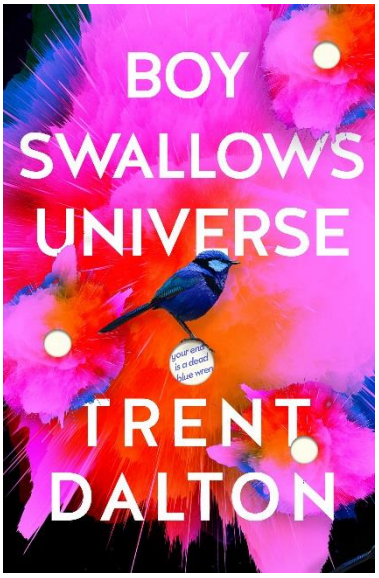

TRENT DALTON INTRODUCES

BOY SWALLOWS UNIVERSE

About three summers ago on a blazing hot Boxing Day in South-east Queensland I was standing at the back of a small blue Holden Barina with my mum. The boot hatchback door was up and I was helping my mum load a bunch of Christmas gifts and cooking equipment into her car. We'd all just enjoyed a good family catch-up in a shared Bribie Island holiday unit, one of those nice peaceful Christmases where nobody argues about who was supposed to make the coleslaw, and my mum was distracted for a moment by my daughter – she must have been about seven then – doing one of her impromptu interpretive dances through an avenue of coastal paperbark trees. I followed her eyes and was, naturally, also quickly ensnared in this vision… my girl's hair blowing in the wind, her bare feet making ballet leaps between those trees, a stick in her hand acting as a wand…

Then out of nowhere and for no apparent reason – not moving her eyes for a second away from my daughter - Mum said something beautiful. 'I wouldn't change any of it,' Mum said. It sounds cheesy, I know, but that's what she said. 'I wouldn't change any of it. If I had to go through it all again to get to this, I would do it. I wouldn't change any of it.'

I'm a journalist who has written thousands of words about the most harrowing stories about Australian life in the suburbs… tragedy, violence, trauma, upheaval, betrayal, death, destruction, families, abandonment, drugs, crime, hope and healing, no hope, no healing … and I'm often reminded by my gut that kicks from the inside sometimes how my own mother's life story remains the most harrowing story I've ever had the strange and often unsettling honour of being a significant part of.

She's the one. 'Who's the most interesting person you've ever spoken to?' people ask. Nah, not the Dalai Lama, nah, not John Howard or Bob Hawke or Priscilla flipping Presley or Heath Ledger or Matt Damon. Nah, it's my Mum, by a damn sight. You'll know why, when you read the book.

Though to be honest, the book doesn't say a tenth of what's she's been through and, in turn, my admiration for her, for coming out the other side of those things, for getting to the point one day three summers ago where she's looking at her granddaughter dancing and she comes to the realisation that it was all heading somewhere – all the pain, all the social suffering, all the madness, all the longing, all the loss, all those bad choices and all those good choices – they were all leading to a girl she loves more than life itself dancing between some swaying trees.

So that's where the book started, by that boot of mum's Holden Barina. It took a year to write between the hours of 8pm and 10pm after work, and it took my whole life to write. The research was really remembrance. Remembering all those years when the world around my small family crumbled. When people we loved were being taken away. When things we thought true were being turned false. Heads were being slammed into fibro walls. Dangerous people were knocking on doors at daytime. And when that world of ours crumbled – the world of prisons and small-time suburban crime – and my brothers and I went to live with my father who I never knew, that world we knew was replaced with a new world of a Brisbane Housing Commission cluster swirling with a hundred social issues – alcoholism, unemployment, domestic violence, generational social curses – all of which I would later write about as a journalist.

All of me is in here. Everything I've ever seen. Everything I've ever done. Every girl I ever kissed on a wagged school day, every punch I ever threw, every tooth I ever lost in a Housing Commission street scrap and every flawed, conflicted, sometimes even dangerous Queenslander I've ever come across, as the son of two of the most incredible and beautiful and sometimes troubled parents a kid could ever be born to.

The key characters all draw on the people I love most in the world. The most beautiful and complex people I've ever known, and I never even had to walk out the door of my house to find them. I just wanted to give the world a story. To turn all these crazy and sad and tragic and beautiful things I've seen into a crazy, sad, tragic and beautiful story.

Love, above all else, is threaded through this novel. I wanted to write about how it is possible to love someone who has killed. How it is possible to love someone who has hurt you deeply. How love is the closest thing we have to the truly profound. The kid in the book is feeling love like he's feeling the edge of the universe, and it's so big and beyond him he can only see it in colours and explosions in the cosmos. He can explain those things he sees in his mind – even the things he might hear in his head – with about as much clarity as anyone can truly give the mysteries of true love. He can only feel these things.

Ultimately, it's a love story.

All I think I've done as a journalist over 17 years, if I'm being really honest with myself, is process all the baggage of my life through the stories of thousands of Australians who tell me their deepest darkest secrets in the sacred spaces of their living rooms, and I take these secrets and turn them as respectfully as possible into magazine stories, and these stories help me learn and know and sometimes even heal … *Boy Swallow Universe* is me taking all my own secrets this time and turning them as respectfully as possible into a novel.

This book is for the never believers and the believers and the dreamers. This book is for anyone around the world who has been 13 years old. This book is for a generation of Australians who were promised by their parents they would be told all the answers as soon as they were old enough. Well, now you're old enough.

Here are my answers:

1. Every lost soul can be found again. Fates can be changed. Bad can become good.
2. True love conquers all.
3. There is a fine line between magic and madness and all should be encouraged in moderation.
4. Australian suburbia is a dark and brutal place.
5. Australian suburbia is a beautiful and magical place.
6. Home is always the first and final poem.