

A Conversation with the Author

Where did the idea for Not Bad People come from?

Not Bad People was inspired by a real-life letting go ceremony I was invited to years ago. A group of women stood on the balcony of quite a posh house, letting off lanterns full of secret wishes. As the lanterns disappeared, I found myself wondering what would happen if they hit something. I wrote the first chapter almost exactly as it appears here shortly afterwards, but put it to one side because I wasn't sure what happened next. When I took it out nearly a year later, I knew.

How much of the book is fact, and how much is fiction?

Like many novels, Not Bad People is firmly fiction – but it has been colored in places by real life. I've had three-way friendships with interesting dynamics, and ex-boyfriends I've hung on to for far too long. Friends and I have spent many hours discussing the vagaries of dating in our late thirties, and wondering why we were still single when we were, quite frankly, bloody awesome. Lou's house contains décor I have known.

Where I've most drawn on my own experiences is in writing about Aimee's mental struggles. I began having what I now know were bouts of anxiety and OCD in my twenties, when – like Aimee – I started working as a journalist. I worried about upsetting people with what I wrote, and would strip anything contentious – and interesting – from my copy. (Fabulously, I once spent a year writing an opinion column that contained no actual opinions.) I was also petrified about getting anything wrong and would fact-check excessively, taking newspaper proofs home with me to reread even after the paper had gone to bed. I wrote restaurant reviews for a while, and my lovely boyfriend at the time (who earned more than I did) would pay for us to eat at the same restaurant over and over, so I could make sure my comments were accurate. Like Aimee, I've spent a long dark night paralyzed with the realization that I'd gotten the accents wrong over the words *crème brûlée*.

You're using the past tense. Do you no longer suffer from anxiety?

I felt like I'd largely beaten my 'head stuff' when I moved into radio. I host a talk show, and there's no time for continuous checking or ruminating in live radio – if you make a mistake, you've got no option but to keep going. The OCD retreated as I thrived in this job, reappearing in times of stress or major decision making but no longer a day-to-day issue.

However, it came galloping back when it came time to edit this book. The writing of Not Bad People had been pure joy, just tremendous fun. Creating Aimee was actually incredibly cathartic. But the moment we shifted to reviewing the copy – checking! – something in my head shifted as well. I began worrying about details and facts I'd written that might be offensive or insensitive or just plain wrong. Before long I was overthinking, overchecking, and had lost my sense of perspective.

So what did you do?

I got help. Anxiety is a thief, and I could see that it was stealing my happiness, my health, my time – and also the time of those I was working with. I began working with a professional and also prioritized taking better care of myself: exercise, nutrition, meditation etc.

The ‘head stuff’ hasn’t completely disappeared, but I can recognize the patterns and triggers, which is hugely helpful. I’m not sure I’ll ever be totally free of it – but I’m also making my peace with that. I’ve come to the conclusion that the part of my head that makes up stories, like this novel, might also be the part of my head that, well, makes up stories.

Why did you set Not Bad People in Australia when you’re not an Australian?

I did worry – as I do – that Australians wouldn’t take kindly to me setting a book in their country. But I’ve been an expatriate for most of my adult life – I’ve spent less than two years in my native New Zealand in the past two decades, so I’m a foreigner there too in many ways. And I borrow Australia with genuine affection. As a child, it was the holiday destination of choice; our bigger, more exciting neighbor with its proper cities and brand-name shops and better weather. These days, it’s home to several of my Godchildren and some of my closest friends, so I have plenty of reasons to visit and beds to stay in. Ultimately though, it was a matter of plot – the illegality of the lanterns – that made the decision of where to base the book for me.

Setting the book in Australia was a wonderful excuse for a road trip, though. I took a month off work and drove around country Victoria, ‘helping’ on vineyards and taking copious notes and photos. I had no real plan, except to be in a town called Echuca for New Year’s Eve, because they were having a firework display over the river, like the one I’d already planned for my book. It seemed like a fantastic co-incidence, so I booked an Airbnb in the town’s old post office (hello Sharna!) and slowly made my way across the state towards it, driving from small town to small town, noting what time the sun set, what kind of birds were making all that racket, and finding inspiration at every stop.

One horrible co-incidence I could never have foreseen: during my trip, a seaplane crashed into a river near Sydney on New Year’s Eve. Talk about goosebumps. I’ve deliberately taken out the year this book was originally set in, because I didn’t want anyone to think I was basing Pete’s accident on the real crash, which tragically claimed a number of lives.

Where did the town of Hensley come from?

Hensley is a mix of my favorite small towns from my road trip. When I think of Hensley’s main street, I picture Beechworth, which is surely one of the most beautiful towns in Australia. The river in my mind is the section of the Murray that passes through Echuca, while the ranges outside Hensley are those that overlook Heathcote. Sharna’s post office is a mix of a number of wonderful buildings on the Mornington Peninsula.

I’ve spent a lot of time in Australia over the years, but I didn’t realize until this trip that nearly all of it had been in the bigger cities. This visit made me fall in love with country Victoria and its people. I come from a small rural town myself, and we’re pretty friendly, but

I was taken aback by how welcoming everyone was. Winemakers sat with me for hours, patiently talking through the stresses and joys of Aimee and Nick's livelihood. I saw a small plane in the sky in Echuca, and sat at the local airfield waiting for it to land; the pilot has not only answered countless WhatsApp questions over the months, but also kindly took me flying so I could experience the pleasure of floating above such an amazing landscape. More than once, I found myself in front of a real estate office window, looking at houses for sale and thinking – why not? I'm currently plotting a new novel, the seeds of which were planted during this trip and which will be based in a similar setting – so who knows?