

What inspired the idea of The Lost Girls?

I was waiting for a bus to go home to Balmain, and a young girl in school uniform caught my eye. I thought idly that she looked just like a girl my daughter had known slightly; then I remembered with a jolt that my daughter was now an adult. A little 'What if?' started burrowing into my brain. What if the schoolgirl was that child of twenty years earlier? What would it be like to find I had slipped twenty years into the past? I couldn't stop thinking about the notion until I had sat down and plotted out a rough version of 'The Lost Girls'.

How much of your inspiration comes from real life and real people?

I should probably say most of it, but at the same time my stories and characters are entirely fictitious. I use observations of real life and real people as my raw materials and create a world that's a sort of collage. A sense of how real people live, feel and interact, of the sorts of things that can happen in a real environment and of the emotional journeys people undertake enables me to dream up entire realistic structures of people, places and events. Then my job as a writer is to describe them.

This may sound silly, because 'The Lost Girls' centres on something that could not happen in the real world – a small question of time travel – but I ask the reader to accept that and then reflect on what it would actually be like.

Are the characters based on anyone you know?

Again, my answer is yes and no. My characters are based on no-one I know, and everyone I know. I have never created a character who is based on just one person, but most of them are constructed from elements and interesting characteristics of family, friends, acquaintances and people I have observed from afar.

I have been asked if the central character in this book – and in other books I have written – is me. The answer is a resounding no, but when I am writing in the first person it feels natural to create a person who shares my values and emotional responses.

What would you do if you could change something from your own past?

As I think I have demonstrated in this book, that's not advisable! I would love to travel back in time and observe my own past life, as Stella does, and resist the temptation to meddle. But I don't think even I am strong enough to do that. If I found myself back at home on the evening of March 17, 1961, with my older sister Heather bending over my bed to say goodnight before going off to the picture theatre – I had the flu – I would seize her and demand that she stay at home, and I would hold onto her and not let go until she agreed. She was sixteen, and she did not deserve to die in a road accident that night.

What's next, for you?

I have a two-book deal with my publisher, Simon & Schuster, and I am deeply immersed in writing the second book. My working title is 'Both Sides Now', after the Joni Mitchell song, and if all goes well it could be out this time next year.