***The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone* Bookseller Q&A**

1) What was the inspiration for the novel's narrator, eleven year-old Tikka?

I wanted to tell the story through the eyes of an eleven year-old girl because eleven is that murky territory – that blurry in-between land – caught between being a child and adulthood. Balanced between knowing and not knowing.

At the time of the Van Apfel girls' disappearance, Tikka is precisely eleven and one-sixth and is a slightly precocious, but ultimately unreliable narrator. For a start, Tikka's too close to the three Van Apfel sisters to be able to view their disappearance objectively. They're her friends, she's grown up with them as her neighbours, and this colours her perception of what takes place.

Moreover, Tikka's version of events hinges on second-hand information and neighbourhood gossip that she tries to piece together. So often she's deemed too young to know and details about the disappearance are withheld from her. And yet Tikka knows things that the adults around her don't know. She keeps secrets about her friends' disappearance.

As a result, for the next twenty years Tikka remains trapped in a purgatory of only partial understanding. She never fully learns what happened to her friends. Nor can she let the mystery of their disappearance go.

Ultimately, Tikka represents the idea of seeing versus not seeing. Who's to say that what we *don't* see has any less impact on us than those things we actually witness?

2) Why so much humour in what's supposed to be a dark novel?

The humour forced its way in to the novel. As fast as I tried to create a creepy, spine-tingling story, there was Mrs Lantana, Secretary of the School Council, enforcer of the canteen roster, and doyenne of the uniform shop (open the third Friday of the month), only now she's running a vigil for the missing girls.

There was Miss Elith, the Performing Arts teacher, decked out in her 'Showstopper' t-shirt except that most of the letters were lost down the side of her terrifying chest, so Miss Elith's shirt simply reads: 'Ho-top'.

And there was the Senior Girls and Boys' Choir who sing 'I Am Australian', regardless of the occasion, because the only other song they know is 'Bound for Botany Bay', and that is *not* appropriate for a community in grief. Not with all those toorali-orali-additys in the chorus.

In fact, now I think about it, I'm not sure it's even possible to tell such a very Australian story without some absurdist humour sneaking in.

3) Why Australian Gothic?

My novel was very much born of the idea of writing an Australian Gothic novel. The concept of Gothic literature (think: gargoyles and garrets) seems so at odds with our sparkling sunshine, our blisteringly blue skies in Australia. And yet perhaps all this sunlight serves to heighten the shadows? Isn't the nightmare worse if it unfolds during the day?

Barbara Baynton, Elizabeth Jolley, Patrick White and Helen Garner are among a host of Australian authors who have explored the idea of Goth-gone-antipodean. Their writing often splices the everyday with the terrifying, causing us to question those things that are most familiar to us.

4) What's the role of nostalgia in *The Van Apfel Girls are Gone*?

1990s suburbia offered too irresistible a setting for such a strange story. It was a time when smiling 'Safety House' signs were screwed tight to the letterboxes of every house. But inside our homes? The Azaria Chamberlain case still played out on the nightly news.

The characters in *The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone* eat rissoles and play Game Boys. They recite lines from the movie *Beetlejuice*. (Sunnyboy ice-blocks were still available in the local supermarket – what a time to be alive.)

Most significantly, however, 1992 was a world without home Internet access for the majority of Australian families. And perhaps it's this pre-Google sensibility that enables so many of the people in Tikka's community to simply accept they will never know what happened to the Van Apfel girls, while Tikka cannot let it go.

5) Can you give us your elevator pitch for *The Van Apfel Girls are Gone*?

The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone is a blackly comic, coming-of-age story that occurs during a single, sweltering summer – the summer the three Van Apfel sisters disappear.

Set in 1990s suburbia, in an eerie river valley with an unexplained stench, the story is narrated by friend and neighbour, Tikka Malloy. But Tikka is only eleven and one-sixth, and far too close to the missing girls for her narration to be considered completely reliable.

Tikka explains that Hannah, Cordelia and Ruth Van Apfel vanished during the school's outdoor 'Showstopper' concert. As the Van Apfel girls' oppressive religious home-life is revealed, and as suspicions are raised about Cordie's relationship with a local teacher, it fast becomes apparent that something more sinister may have happened on the night the Van Apfel girls disappeared.

When Tikka returns to the valley twenty years later she is no less obsessed with the disappearance of her friends. The incident has haunted Tikka for her whole life, and the mystery remains unsolved forever.

It's just that now, after two decades, Tikka is trying to find a way to make peace with that.

6) How did this book come about?

In 2016 I was invited to be part of a Sydney Writers Festival panel hosted by actor Bryan Brown. The event was held at the western Sydney theatre named in Bryan's honour. And the theme? Creativity and place. *How had the landscape of my childhood influenced my writing? How did place speak to my creative process?* Worthy topics certainly. But difficult to answer if – like me – you wrote other people's stories for a living.

Back then I'd ghostwritten half a dozen titles, for various people, but I'd never published anything where *my* experience of 'place' crept onto the page. (Ghostwriters are, by very definition, invisible.)

And so I found myself on stage at the Bryan Brown Theatre reading aloud to several hundred people from my 'novel' – a novel that existed almost-exclusively in my head and that weighed in at around 5,000 words. It was, I explained, very loosely inspired by the setting of my childhood – a bush suburb on the fringe of Sydney.

Following the panel discussion a tall figure in the front row was first on his feet for question time. What was the title of my novel, he wanted to know. Could I tell him more? *What happened next?* I pictured the two-hundred-or-so blank pages that followed the prologue.

'Good question, Bryan,' I admitted.

And so I got to work on *The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone.* Because Bryan Brown had shown an interest in my work, and he needed to know what happened next.

7) What's the difference between writing as a ghostwriter and writing under your own name?

There are several differences between ghostwriting versus writing under your own name. The former generally involves a fair amount of collaboration; the latter works better in solitary confinement. As an author you're required by law to make a clever speech at your book launch, meanwhile, as a ghostwriter you get to stand surreptitiously at the back of the room sampling the free champagne.

Perhaps the greatest difference, however, is: plot.

Ghostwriters generally work with a pre-made plot. Malcolm Knox, award-winning author and clandestine ghostwriter sums it up here when he says: "Writing a life is the least of it. The real work is living it…" That is: the subject of the book has done all the hard yards in already living out the plot. Sure, there are many (*many*) hours of crafting and drafting and editing required when writing somebody else's story. There are a million different ways to write the one life, and as a ghost you're responsible for coming up with the best one.

But writing someone's memoir or autobiography means you're at least presented with all the possible plot elements, even if you have to decide how to piece them together. By comparison, writing fiction felt like doing a jigsaw when I wasn't confident I even had all the pieces in the box.

8) What do you want readers to feel when they've finished your book?

A little bit heartbroken. At the same time, I'd like my readers to have laughed inappropriately many times along the way.

9) Who are your literary influences and heroes?

I'm in awe of Ann Patchett for the humanity (and the humour) in her novels. Colum McCann's lyrical language makes me swoon. And Helen Garner because, well, Helen Garner.