

What was the inspiration behind your first novel, 'Vodka doesn't freeze'?

Basically, I wrote this book as a form of therapy for myself. As a psychologist, I've worked with survivors of pretty much every horrible crime you can imagine, but child sexual abuse is amongst the most hideous. One of the most effective treatment techniques for traumatised people is to encourage them to sort through their experiences in great detail. In helping my clients, I've been through these details with them – all the sights, sounds, smells, etc of the things they endured. Writing this book was my way of emotionally processing some of these experiences. Because this is a work of fiction, however, the best part was being able to end the stories however I liked – making sure I dealt with the bad guys the way I wanted to.

The inspiration for the title, 'Vodka doesn't freeze', also comes from my clients. People who have survived terrible experiences often try to shut their memories of these events out, to push them away from their consciousness – they try to freeze them. Just like vodka, however, human pain won't freeze; it inevitably stays molten, waiting. It leaks back into our lives whenever it gets the chance, causing all sorts of dysfunction and suffering. My job is to teach people that it's usually better to face the pain, to work through it, than to hope you can avoid dealing with it.

You stated recently that your characters were drawn from your files, are they a mixture or specifically based?

Although every crime in the book has actually happened in some way, the last thing I'd want is for one of my clients to think that I used their experience as entertainment in a novel. So, I've tried to capture the stories, coping styles, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of different survivors and offenders that I've worked with, and then merged, spliced and embroidered them to create the characters in the novel. In this way, no character in the book represents any one real person.

You're a successful Sydney based psychologist specialising in psychological trauma and sex offences, what made you turn to crime writing?

You know, a lot of people who've read advanced copies of 'Vodka doesn't freeze' have said that although they almost read it with their hands in front of their eyes, they really appreciated the fact that they knew that events like those in the book have actually happened. Many of these people were parents, who told me that they think it's important that people realise how predators think and behave. It freaks them out, but maybe it helps them better protect their kids in some ways. I guess this book allowed me to tell others what to look out for, without preaching to them. Maybe now I'll stop telling all my friends and family to be careful out there.

Has writing always been a passion for you?

Well, for the past fifteen years all of the writing I've done has been in the field of psychology – clinical assessments and reports, writing training programs and texts to help other clinicians who work with trauma. But I majored in English and psychology in my undergraduate degree; I just haven't had a chance to indulge this side of me until I wrote this first novel.

'Vodka doesn't freeze' is based in Sydney, was this an important factor when writing the novel?

When I read a novel, I love to become completely absorbed in the city or environment in which the hero lives. Because this book is set in Sydney, I've tried to give it a life within the pages, to almost make it a character in the book. And because I've exclusively lived and practised in Sydney, it made sense to base the action here.

Tell me more about the novel's main character, Sergeant Jill Jackson?

Jill is a kick-arse police detective who copes with a horrific experience in her childhood by implementing extreme control and rigidity in her life. She's an exercise freak and kick-boxing champion who punishes perceived weaknesses in herself by training harder. She's a talented cop because she can screen out emotionality – until her latest murder investigation cuts too close to the bone. She represents one of the ways that some individuals cope with trauma – shutting off one's emotions can actually make you highly functional at specific tasks: Jill's strong, focused and

determined. However, a lack of emotional flexibility can also cause one to break, rather than bend, when enough pressure is applied. Jill is forced to try to cope with her own splintering personality as she hunts the serial killer in this novel.

You have been referred to as Australia's Kathy Reichs, the US based best selling crime writer, how do you feel about that, it's a lot of pressure? Is she someone that has influenced your writing aspirations?

Well, I'm very flattered by the comparison. Delighted. Daunted. And yeah, I do aspire to international success as a writer. I'm shocked that people are so excited about this first book, however. I didn't expect that it would be published. I thought that maybe by the time I'd written three, I'd get the hang of it. As I said, I used 'Vodka Doesn't Freeze' as catharsis, but I figured I'd send it out to the few Australian publishers who'll take a look at unsolicited manuscripts. I sent the first fifty pages off to five publishers and four of them got back to me within a week, wanting the rest. I had to take a week off work to edit the rest of the manuscript. They all expressed an interest in publishing it, but in the end, I went with Random House because they shared the same vision that I have for where I'd like to be.

Who are your favourite writers?

Thomas Harris, Charles Dickens, Alexander McCall Smith, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Tad Williams

Your second novel is due for release in July 2008, what can readers expect?

Jill Jackson is back. She's been seconded to a taskforce targeting a home invasion gang in the South Western suburbs of Sydney. The violence of the one of the offenders has been escalating and the detectives realise they're hunting a true psychopath.

Entering the mind of a pure psychopath is fascinating and terrifying. I've had the (mis)fortune to be part of interviews with just a few. Fortunately, they're relatively rare creatures – people devoid of human empathy, who may not even have any conception of compassionate feeling for others. While our prisons are full of people who've committed terrible acts, many of them were committed by impulsive individuals, who although they can be extremely aggressive, may also have some capacity to love and be loved by others. A true psychopath has no such capacity. They see others as mere objects and some of them only feel real, or sexually aroused, when another person is suffering. In the second novel we see how psychological trauma in childhood can create a person like that. Some of us are born with lower emotional sensitivity than others. When they're born to a relatively functional, loving family, they may grow up to be law-abiding, but very ruthless business people or fierce sports people. When such people are born into families who torture and abuse them, however, a true psychopath can be created. We meet one in the second novel, and learn how he came to be.

Is your main career focus now crime-writing or do you still practise as a clinical psychologist?

I'm still very busy in my psychology practice working with clients in Sydney and training other mental health professionals in assessing and treating psychological trauma across Australia and in New Zealand.

Where do you see yourself in five years time?

I'd love to be writing fulltime and practising psychology part-time, rather than the other way around, as it is currently. I'd also like to have more time for my family.

Describe your perfect Sunday afternoon?

Well, because I've worked pretty much seven days a week for the past fifteen years, this would have to be a fantasy. It's a pretty lazy one, understandably, given the last sentence. My husband and I would be sleeping off a long seafood lunch, the sheets kicked off, a sea breeze making the heat of the afternoon bearable. My cat would have one paw touching me and her tail touching him.