

## New Australian Writing



Suzanne McCourt's debut novel, *The Lost Child*, is set in Burley Point, a quiet fishing town on Australia's wild southern coast. Here, McCourt talks with Romy Ash about writing her young protagonist, Sylvie, and

constructing the troubled narrative of a small town and a missing child.

# The Lost Child

Romy Ash interviews Suzanne McCourt about her debut novel

**T**he *Lost Child* is a quiet epic, spanning a decade of immense change in the lives of its characters and the small rural town of Burley Point where the novel is set. This is a book that took over 10 years to write, and Suzanne McCourt says, 'in the way of many first novels', she 'let the story unravel without a lot of planning and structuring. Initially I had a vague idea that I was writing about divorce and a child's longing for a father. I also had a sense of an ending, which I seem to need in order to be able to trust such a lengthy and unpredictable process. As the novel progressed and deepened, I often felt I was wrestling an octopus with tentacle limbs.' Not that McCourt's novel resembles this tentacle-limbed sea beast; rather, McCourt has created a vivid world, and a story told through the precise eye of Sylvie, who when the story begins is only five.

In 2000, McCourt won a Writers Victoria mentorship with Andrea Goldsmith, who suggested she was writing three novels, not one. McCourt says, 'As part of the re-drafting process, Sylvie may well have been left on the cutting-room floor had it not been for the death of my mother, followed over the next eight months by the death of three other close family members.' McCourt says the book originally began with the words, 'My father has gone. He has taken his brown skin and flashing eyes, his laughs and shouts and silences. He has taken his beer-man smell, his fishy stink, his whiskers in the basin ... Here, Sylvie's voice is strong and assured, just as it is in the finished novel.'

*The Lost Child* grew from McCourt's crippling experience of grief, and through that she says, 'an older, deeper grief began to surface – the loss of my

father through divorce when I was five, and his early death when I was barely out of my teens – pain which I'd long repressed and denied.' She allowed herself to listen to Sylvie's voice, a voice she'd 'been given years before'.

Writing in a child's voice is constraining; there are difficulties in conveying information about other characters. McCourt says she came to realise she had 'unconsciously chosen a constraint that exactly matched an area of deep interest – the way we construct our surface truths while another very different world lies beneath'. This is a theme that runs deeply through the book, where the small town setting, even the earth the town is built on, harbours its own secrets.

The landscape McCourt evokes is menacing; the environment threatens to sweep a child out to sea, and snakes lurk in the underbrush where the ground itself is unstable. It's riddled with caves and soak holes – the land is a trickster. But the environment is also the town's livelihood; Burley Point is a fishing town, but there are hints the ground below might offer oil, and with it the chance of a new life. The landscape McCourt depicts is also heartbreakingly beautiful. This is a book where all the birds, animals, plants – even the creatures that lurk in the rock pools – are precisely named, and rendered with what reads as love. The characters' lives are set against this rich mosaic of flora and fauna.

McCourt grew up in a similar town, the tiny fishing village of Beachport in the south-east of South Australia. She says, 'It is a strange and beautiful place. Over thousands of years, waters have seeped into the ground, eroding weaknesses in the limestone and carving



Suzanne McCourt. Photograph by Peter Derrett

out underground rivers and caves. There are swamps and lagoons that fill and disappear and reappear; reedy soaks in paddocks, fenced to stop sheep and cattle drowning.' She didn't keep the town's real name, saying she found she 'couldn't write freely if constrained by reality'. She says that she sometimes returned to the town, looking for authenticity, but instead found the opposite. She needed distance from reality to write: 'Burley Point is not Beachport, and Sylvie is not me.'

*The Lost Child* is set in post-war 1950s, and McCourt captures an incredible naivety in Burley Point's reaction to change and development. Sylvie's father, Mick, is the only voice of dissent, the only

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hint that the march of change could have long-reaching consequences, beyond the quick economic benefits. McCourt says, 'Burley Point is a microcosm of generally conservative attitudes that exist throughout Australia, particularly rural Australia. There is always a struggle between the enlightened view and self-interest.'

McCourt also does a wonderful job of capturing the intimacies of small-town 1950s life: 'Growing up in the country keeps you closer to people's lives; there are fewer places to hide. In cities tragedies

happen to strangers; in country towns they happen to people you know.' There is a grand scope to *The Lost Child*, and it tackles big issues – post-traumatic stress disorder, domestic violence, the limited options for women in the 1950s – but these never feel like capital 'I' issues; rather, they are all filtered through the character of Sylvie, and centred in family. Sylvie's mother is crippled with acute anxiety after Dunc, Sylvie's older brother, goes missing, but Sylvie rallies against the conservative options available to her and right from the beginning attempts to write a new future, one where girls get to be heroes. *And if I were an eagle with an eagle eye, could I fly high enough to see the Coorong, and Dunc in the city? Could I sweep down and rescue him in my eagle feet? ...*

McCourt's book tackles themes of 'loss and resilience, guilt, shame and blame, and the power of landscape and community to nurture and save'. McCourt says, 'Aristotle theorised that we tell ourselves stories until we arrive at a version of life, or ourselves, that gives us power over our world. There are estrangements in my family that go back generations; perhaps in *The Lost Child* I'm drawn, in part, to finding different ways of loving?' On this idea of imagination working with memory, McCourt says, 'it's almost an alchemical process, the great mystery of art'.

Romy Ash is the author of *Floundering*, her first novel, which was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin, Commonwealth Writers' Prize and Prime Minister's Literary Award, among others. She was awarded the SMH Best Young Australian Novelists of the year award for 2013.