



Brooke Davis

Lost and Found, Brooke Davis' debut novel, was prompted by the death of her mother, killed suddenly while driving in 2007, writes

Caroline Baum.

Grief is a funny thing. After the initial shock, for a fortunate and talented few, it can harness sadness to positive effect and creative purpose, prompting big universal questions, offering a shared way of navigating the strange new country you find yourself in once you have come face-to-face with death, especially the death of a parent – especially the unexpected death of a parent in a freak accident.

That's what happened to Brooke Davis, author of *Lost and Found*, a debut novel generating sustained industry buzz. Booksellers are predicting it will generate the same feel-good word of mouth as last year's bestselling *The Rosie Project* by Graeme Simsion.

At last count, the book was being sold in 21 countries, after an intense bidding war at the London Book Fair. The latest, Davis says with a giggle, is Romania.

This week, following in the footsteps of Hannah Kent, she was the subject of ABC TV's *Australian Story*. "It's a privilege," she acknowledges, "but the irony is that now I am a writer, but have no time to write because I'll be promoting the book for the next year." The beginnings of a new book are in her head, but it will have to wait.

Success is no compensation for the loss of her mother, killed suddenly while driving in 2007 when Davis was 27. "It seems she may have been reaching out of the car to pick up a newspaper and put her foot on the accelerator by mistake," says Davis.

At the time, she was travelling overseas and received the urgent message to call home that everyone dreads. Readers learn this in an introduction that her publisher, Hachette, suggested as a curtain-raiser to a charmingly original story about living with loss.

It opens with Millie Bird, who is seven-and-a-half, discovering death for the first time when her dog, Rambo, is run over. Then her father dies, and her mother leaves her in the underwear section of a department store.

"Millie showed up four months after mum died," says Davis. "I love the way a child can ask the thorny questions an adult doesn't. And although her situation is painful, it is not always dark, so she allowed me to rediscover the happy person I was before mum died."

Millie joins forces with a marvellously vivid, shouty woman called Agatha Pantha, who is 82 and has not left the house since her husband died. "She is there as a contrast to Millie, but also to bring anger out into the open," says Davis.

They make for an unlikely couple, joined by Karl, an 87-year-old touch typist who has escaped his nursing

home in a moment of clarity, with a plastic mannequin as his companion.

"My nan is in a nursing home with a strange man in the bed facing her. She's never shared a room with any other man than her husband, so it's shocking for her to have to do so now."

Beyond the comic potential of its misshapen trio, *Lost and Found* expresses heartfelt and profound humanity, arising from Davis' five years of soul-searching about how to live when faced with the knowledge that anyone you love can die at any moment.

"Community and shared experience became very important to me," she says "I'm not very good at taking advice. Connection is how I work things out, being a sociable creature." She found no solace in novels. "I wanted real things when mum died, not fiction."

Eventually, she embarked on a PhD on the subject in which she had become an expert: grief. In the process,

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she rediscovered her original attraction for fiction and wrote the novel as part of it. Meanwhile, she continued working in a local bookshop in Perth, where she lives with two housemates, one of whom, Sam Carmody, was shortlisted this year for the Vogel prize.

"It's the furthest place from home and the isolation attracts me. New places attract me with the lure of creating a new life," she says, describing herself as "pretty nomadic. Every year I reassess." The family home was at Bellbrae in Victoria, but Davis' parents separated about five years before her mother's death. Davis' father is a sports psychologist. Her mother worked in community home care.

She has been astonished by the generosity of the local writing scene. "Craig Silvey [author of *Jasper Jones*] came into the bookshop and told me he'd read one of my stories, and then he put me in touch with his agent," she says, still sounding incredulous.

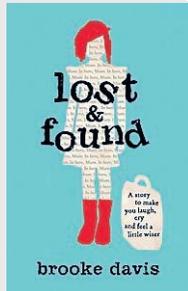
The elder of her two brothers, Rhett, has also become a writer since his mother's death ("He's my hero as a writer," says Davis), putting a career in IT on hold for two years to complete a master of creative writing in Canada, a country for which Davis has a special affection.

"I like its freshness and diversity, and that you can live simply in isolated places with little money. I was in St John, in Newfoundland, a place full of musical talent, storytellers and friendly pubs, when the deal on *Lost and Found* was done," she says, sounding as if she would happily go back there at some future date.

Despite earlier protests that fiction offered no consolation, Alice Munro's short stories were important companions on her writer's journey. "Originally, the novel was going to be more fantastical, but after I read her, I decided to be more real to communicate the big ideas."

She also found comfort in a most unlikely place – those cheesy, cliché-ridden phrases that appear in Hallmark cards. "Sometimes the corny can be profound," she says with a laugh. "Before mum's death, I was cynical, but after, I wallowed in sentiment."

So what has she learnt from the homilies of sympathy cards and from personal experience? "That everyone is doing their best to survive. I don't judge how they do it."



Inevitably, books about grief trigger enormous reactions in readers. Is she prepared for the onslaught of stories they will want to share based on their own loss as she embarks on her first author tour?

"Absolutely, yes. I want to hear them.

"After it happened, I felt my brothers were the only people who understood. We lived at the new house mum had just finished building and settled in together for a month, sitting on the balcony, laughing, bawling and sharing our dreams. Once you've seen the crack in the world, you can't un-see it. That can be paralysing and debilitating, so it's good to talk to other people. I'm not going to call my mother's death a gift, but it does put things in perspective and has made me more patient. When you've faced the enormity of that, road rage doesn't matter."

Which brings us back to the car in which her mother died. Perhaps surprisingly, Davis drove it as soon as she got home. "It's a little Toyota Echo. I had to get it back from the police, but when I did, I felt her presence in it very strongly and I loved how close she was to me in it."

• *Lost and Found* is published by Hachette, \$26.99.