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**13TH BIRTHDAY ISSUE**

**lost & found**

**BROOKE DAVIS ON GRIEF AND LOVE**

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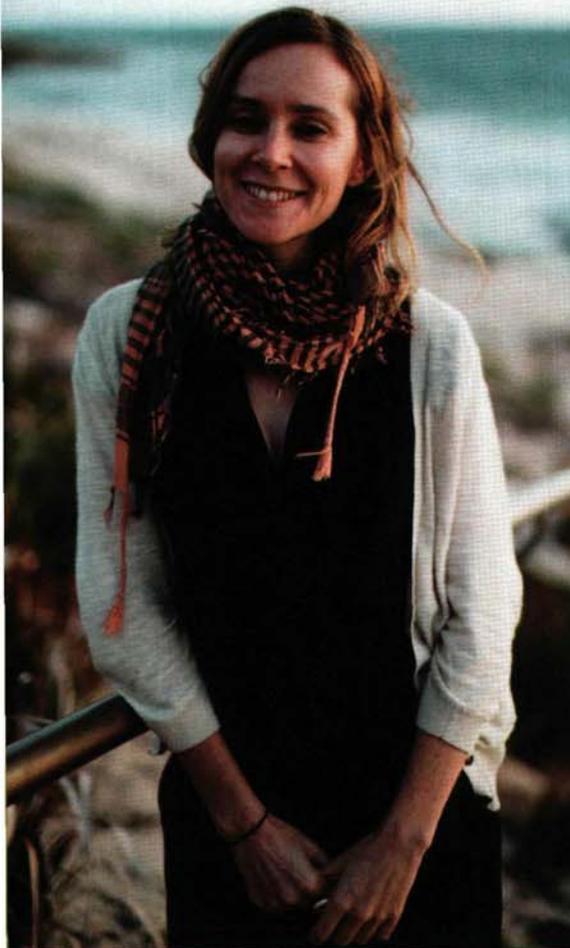
A story to make you laugh, cry and feel a little wiser

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COVER STORY



# the Book of Brooke

Her mother's death at an early age had a profound influence on **BROOKE DAVIS**, whose first novel explores love, ageing, loss and grief. She shares the cathartic experience of writing the book and her delight at its enthusiastic reception with **MAUREEN EPPEN**.

**W**riting about how other people cope with the death of loved ones has been a vital part of her own grieving process for Australian author Brooke Davis, whose debut novel, **Lost & Found**, has garnered publishing deals in 21 territories so far.

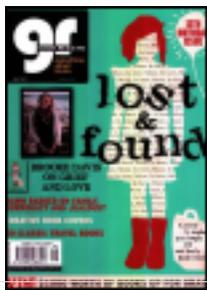
Brooke was 27 and travelling the world when she learned that her mother had died suddenly in a freak accident. Seven years later, her first novel explores the many ways that people respond to loss as its three key characters find hope and new love in the most unexpected places.

One of those characters is seven-year-old Millie, whose father has recently died, and whose mother, struggling to cope and gripped by depression, abandons her only child in a local department store.

It took a long time for Brooke to resume writing fiction after her mother died, and she's not surprised that the first character that came to mind was a little girl obsessed with death.

'It makes sense to me that the first voice that came naturally was that of a child, because I think we do become quite childlike when we're grieving,' Brooke says.

The book's two other key characters are also struggling with loss. The charmingly named Agatha Pantha, a feisty 82-year-old, has locked herself in her home since her husband died, shunning neighbours and shouting rude comments to people passing by. Fellow octogenarian Karl the Touch Typist deals with his wife's death by typing his thoughts on an invisible keyboard, but he's escaped from his nursing home.



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When their paths cross, Millie, Agatha and Karl embark on a road and rail trip from the south coast of WA, through Kalgoorlie and across the Nullarbor. Along the way, they help each other to deal with their sadness, and Agatha and Karl rediscover the capacity to love.

Despite losing her mum so young, Brooke considers herself lucky for the time they had together.

‘When we’re really little, our mums can feel like an extension of ourselves – someone who exists solely for us, who responds to our every need,’ she explains. ‘At 27 I was old enough to know my mum as Jenny, a separate human being, someone I met for coffee, someone I gossiped with, someone I enjoyed spending time with, and her being my mum was kind of incidental to that experience. I had the chance to understand who my mum was from the perspective of an almost-adult – and so many people don’t get to have their mums for that long, so I’m truly grateful for that.’

Being open and honest about her grief without hiding it has been important to Brooke.

‘If I’m having a bad day, I try to give myself the space and time to feel it. Those days remind me that my mum existed once, and they’re important for me.’

‘I’ve thought really deeply about how we as a society put silences on death and grief and pretend they don’t happen. I think it makes us feel like grieving and sadness are abnormal states, and makes us feel pressure to “move on” and achieve “closure”.’

‘This is an important topic: if we’re on Earth long enough, we will all experience the death of someone close, and we will all grieve. We might not share the way we work through this grief, and how we think about death [but] I don’t think we should judge each other about this.’

Writing about her own experiences and fictionalising the experiences of others has helped make Brooke’s grief a little lighter. But

the novel is about much more than coping with loss.

It also examines how society treats the very young and the very old. It’s about unlikely friendships, the possibility of finding love at any age and the kindness of strangers. It is warm, genuine and often hilarious. Brooke possesses a gift for conjuring imagery that is at once original and familiar, and for reaching right into the heart of her characters – and her readers.

Discipline and a lifelong compulsion to write have helped Brooke to hone her storytelling skills. She studied creative writing for an honours degree at the University of Canberra and for a PhD at Curtin University in WA. Previous literary successes include a

university medal for her honours work, the Allen & Unwin Prize for Prose Fiction for a novella called *The Great Australian Tongue* (about a community left

off Matthew Flinders’ map of Australia) and the Verandah Prose Prize for ‘Supermarket Song’, a short story about a girl who sees people’s speech as colour on the air. **Lost & Found**’s Karl the Touch Typist appears in a short story, for which Brooke won the Queensland Writers’ Prize.

‘I’m a pretty disciplined, hard-working type, but I’ve also learned that I need to be kind to myself to get the best out of myself, so I focus on a balanced lifestyle. I love to write, and it’s important to me, but I also love my life outside of that.’

‘Time away from writing is really important to my life as a writer. I work as a bookseller and try not to write on bookshop days unless I have to. I like to keep the two things completely quarantined.’

As an early riser, Brooke is most productive in the morning and has been known to annoy housemates.

‘I’ve lived with non-morning people and when I greet them with a cheery “Morning!” at 9am – when I’ve been up for three or four hours – they glare at me through half-closed eyes and I can tell they wish me an early death.’

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'I'm so energetic and my mind is so clear at that time. There's a quietness and stillness that doesn't exist at any other time of day. The downside is that I'm completely useless after about 2pm!'

Brooke relishes writing from home, where she can work in pyjamas and nap whenever she wants, and she writes in cafes, to absorb the behaviour of people around her.

'I don't sit there with the intention of stealing their lives. It's more of a process of incidental absorption. A person nearby brushes their hair away from their face, or looks at someone, or walks in a certain way, and for some reason the image sticks in my mind and I feel a sense of urgency to nail the moment in language, because it feels like it might represent something.'

Brooke always wanted to be an author and has kept journals since she was young. She achieved early adulation in primary school for a short story about her little brother; it was called 'The Pest'. Her first attempt at a novel, at age 10, was a cross between *Anne of Green Gables*, 'The Baby-Sitters Club' and *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*.

'From memory, it was full of American teen angst and dramatic exchanges between boys and girls in relationships.'

In contrast to young Millie's precarious existence in **Lost & Found**, Brooke recalls an idyllic childhood with her brothers – one older, one younger.

'We lived in the bush near the coast on 10 acres, with plenty of space to play and imagine. My mum and dad were encouraging, patient and open. Sport and exercise were always a huge part of our lives [and] we spent weekends going to tennis tournaments, cricket games, footy matches, and the weeks training for all these things.'

Brooke tells me that Roald Dahl's funny, imaginative, rude and cartoonishly violent stories will always remain her favourites. 'They seemed like my parents shouldn't be encouraging me to read them,' she said. She

also loved the work of Judy Blume, Robin Klein, John Marsden, Emily Rodda, Katherine Paterson and Lucy Maud Montgomery. Tim Winton's 'Lockie Leonard' books offered a first glimpse of the Australian accent on paper: 'I hadn't realised you could do that in writing – give a character the sound of your own voice.'

Brooke says now that she's a kind of grown-up, she appreciates authors with a strong sense of empathy and a skill for getting inside a character's head.

'I love surprising use of language and the kind of writing you want to read slowly – writing that is funny and sad, hopeful and peaceful, strange and terrifying at once. I believe life is like that.'

Writers she admires include Jonathan Safran Foer, Zadie Smith, Chris Cleave, Kurt Vonnegut, Sylvia Plath, Evelyn Waugh, George Saunders,

Justin Torres and Peter Carey. Brooke adds that she's obsessed with Alice Munro's ability to extract extraordinary moments from everyday life.

As **Lost & Found** makes an impact on national and international markets, Brooke is focusing on enjoying every moment of the experience. In Newfoundland, Canada, when the contract was finalised, Brooke headed for a pub and propped herself up at the bar.

'I just sat there on my own, kind of giddy with it all. My life feels like an out-of-body experience, where I'm sitting across from a girl who looks like me who's thinking, *Well, isn't she having a nice time?* I'll never publish a first book again, so I want to savour it.'

'I'm actually bursting to start writing the second book, but have been a little too busy, and it doesn't look like I'll have any time soon, but I have some ideas and am letting them compost in my head at the moment.' 

*Lost & Found* by Brooke Davis is published by Hachette Australia, rrp \$26.99.

