



# The mourning after

Brooke Davis's work is borne of heartache, writes **Rosemarie Milsom**.

**D**EBUT novelist Brooke Davis was a worthy subject of the most recent episode of *Australian Story*. Our newest literary sensation – *Lost & Found* has been sold into 25 countries and will be translated into 20 languages for its overseas release next year – spoke of the sudden death of her mother, Jenny, in a freak accident seven years ago.

“I definitely see my life in the ‘before mum died’ and ‘after mum died’ kind of turning point,” the 34-year-old said. “And I began to try and understand the concept of grief.”

The tragic loss of her mother and the disorienting aftermath inspired *Lost & Found*, which also formed part of Davis's PhD at Perth's Curtin University. The novel centres on three protagonists who are all floundering after the death of a loved-one: Millie, 7, is virtually an orphan after her father dies and her mother abandons her; Agatha Pantha, 82, has not left her house since she was widowed seven years earlier; Karl the Touch Typist is 87 and a nursing home escapee who is still mourning his wife, Evie.

Davis's narrative shifts between the three characters and the reader is immersed in their eccentricities and thoughts. She convincingly handles the challenge of creating a child's perspective and that of the two elderly protagonists. Millie is young enough to lack awareness about the enormity of her situation and her naivety forms a buffer against the risks she is exposed to but at the same time, she has a profound awareness of one of

humankind's greatest dilemmas, as expressed by Davis herself: How do you live knowing that anyone you love can die at any moment? Agatha Pantha's response to that question is to become a cruel recluse paralysed by self-loathing. She shouts abuse at passers-by through a gap in her ivy-covered front window: “Too Asian! Too bald! Pull your pants up! Stupid shoes! Too many hairclips! . . .”

Her foil is the kindly Karl, who encounters Millie at a department store where she has been abandoned by her mother. Their meeting sets off a chain of events that flit from the absurd to the poignant, uniting the three in the search for Millie's mum – though they are all seeking a lot more than that.

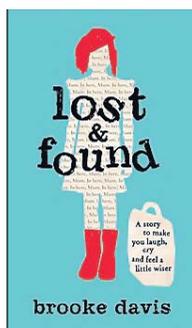
Davis has set her novel in the familiar terrain of Western Australia and the isolated, dusty landscape surrounding Kalgoorlie. She has included a supporting cast of quirky, laconic characters, who at times are a distraction and fail to enhance the plot. The inclusion of the department store mannequin, “Manny”, which is bizarrely transported by Karl and mistaken for a sex toy, is another jarring element.

Davis spent five years writing *Lost & Found* and her care is evident. Her prose is restrained and insightful. Underpinning the surreal journey of the protagonists are reflections about the power and unpredictable impact of grief. The death of someone we love is uniquely felt and discovering a way through the sadness tests our beliefs and challenges those close to us.

*Lost & Found* is informed by Davis's personal heartache but it is buoyed by something more universal – our need to love and be loved, regardless of the risk.

## LOST & FOUND

Brooke Davis, published by Hachette, \$27.





**TRAGIC:** The loss of Brooke Davis's mother and its aftermath inspired her book.  
*Picture: Ailsa Bowyer*