



SECRETS & LIES

Liz Byrski returns with a novel that explores the nature of betrayal. **P6-7**



INSIDE MIND+BODY AND THE FORM



Picking a potent path for renewal

Liz Byrski has returned after a two-year break with a novel that explores the nature of betrayal, writes **Amanda Ellis**

Perth-based writer Liz Byrski believes people have a tendency to hide things they should discuss. The doyenne of women's fiction has returned to the literary fold with *Family Secrets* after a period of illness.

Her last novel, *In the Company of Strangers*, came out in September 2012, pushing out her 18-month book schedule to two years.

Byrski now plans to write a book every two years and to treat herself kindly while she also mentors writing students at Curtin University.

The action of her latest novel centres on the secrets of one family, as its members live out their lives in three countries and five locations.

Byrski says she was inspired to write the tale after a three-week trip to the Apple Isle.

"I was in Tasmania and I'd read *All Passion Spent*, by Vita Sackville-West, which is about an elderly woman whose husband has died," she says.

"She has lived a life that was not her choice. She wanted to be an artist but marriage pushed her in another direction. She has had a good life but it hasn't been her own life.

"What struck me strongly was that it was such a contemporary story."

Sackville-West's literary novel was released in 1931 and introduced the lead character Lady Slane, an 88-year-old woman of privilege who is emancipated by her husband's death.

"It struck me as a thing that a lot of women do, when either a marriage ends through divorce or the death of a partner, is to go off and do a new thing," Byrski says. "They pick up where they put their passions aside in

order to raise their families."

Her tribute is a novel which focuses on the Hawkins family, whose patriarch Gerald has just died after a long illness.

Widow Connie, who on marriage abandoned aspirations of becoming an opera singer, undertakes a journey across the world after being freed from a carer role. Before her departure she has stern words with her family who have formed a plan for her future without her being present. Connie leaves Tasmania and returns to her home country, England, after stopping in France to collect her estranged sister-in-law as a companion for the journey.

Gerald's sister Flora had been cut off from the family at his behest after he found she was a lesbian. The tale of Flora is a sad but deftly told subplot as Byrski explores the toxicity of homophobia and banishment. Flora has escaped her brother's judgment but still carries a sense of shame. Despite her acceptance of her homosexuality, she has been unable to form long-term romantic relationships.

Byrski has spotlighted the effects of secrecy and secret-shaming on people's everyday lives.

"When I set out to write women's fiction, I really wanted to deal with same-sex relationships, because I think they do create awful secrets and awful tensions in families — whereas in my view it

doesn't have to happen," she says.

Byrski believes there are lots of secrets in families.

"We are inclined to hide things from people that we would be better to talk about," she says. "I think that builds up into a crust over relationships. People can't speak openly to each other and then the cracks appear."

Byrski's novel contains three main secrets, affecting her ensemble of characters. A second secret concerns elder son Andrew, a disconnected husband to wife Kerry, and a father to teen Brooke.

The third secret concerns Gerald himself and is the great scandal of the story. Byrski says when the grand secret is revealed to family members, things crack open, exposing both tensions and the withheld secrets.

"None of the people who start out in this story as the main characters, actually know the secret," she reveals. "If there is a deep secret, then that comes as a terrific shock."

Despite the tensions, and characters' attempts to return to old patterns, things work out in the end.

"I was trying to show that it is possible to come together after the revelation of a really dreadful secret," Byrski



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says.

Her novel deals with longing for places and lives lost.

“There’s quite a lot of my nostalgia for England in this, for the England that I grew up in. That is what Connie is after, that England, the England that was full of promise and hope and enthusiasm.”

The British expat’s day-trips to places such as Brighton provided fodder for Connie’s journey of longing and discovery. Byrski has been regularly returning to England for close to 20 years. She has lived in Australia some 30 years.

“Each time I go back, I do go to those places that are special to me,” the author says. “That longing for places where you were young and ambitious doesn’t go away.”

A six-month stint in a hotel in a small Breton fishing village during Byrski’s younger years inspired the town for Flora’s retreat. “I prefer to work with settings I know,” she says.

The author deals with a number of other themes in the book, such as depression, infidelity, stigmatism of asylum seekers, child abuse, drug taking, separation and divorce.

Ultimately though, countering shame is Byrski’s most important message.

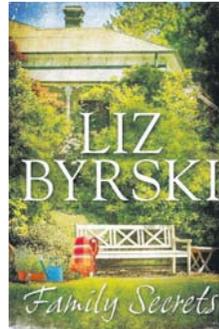
“Traditionally, over centuries, it’s been a way of men shutting women up, to say ‘Don’t worry your pretty head about this, don’t get upset about it, I’ll look after it, don’t ask any more questions’ and so it instils fear and that instils shame

too because you feel put down,” she says.

“I think most men have grown out of that kind of thing now but there’s a few that thrive on it.”

Connie discovers she must re-form her own relationships and set her own direction. Her journey maps a powerful path for other women starting again. 

Family Secrets is published by Pan Macmillan (\$30). Dymocks Garden City will host a morning tea with **Liz Byrski** and books editor **William Yeoman** at Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, next Tuesday at 9.30am. For tickets call 9364 7687 or email gcorders@dymocks.com.au.



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