

# LAUGHTER AND LOSS

**Brooke Davis** basks in the success of her debut novel about grief, *Lost & Found*. **P6-7**



# Fine line between heartbreak and joy

Brooke Davis' novel explores the grieving process, writes

## Ian Nichols

**L**ike the characters in her sensational debut novel *Lost & Found*, Brooke Davis always seems to be on some sort of journey. The Perth author and bookshop sales assistant found out the manuscript had been picked up by major publisher Hachette when she was on an overseas trip. "I was exhausted after finishing my doctorate, so I took myself off to Canada for a while," she says. "I didn't want to think about the book."

*Lost & Found* was the product of Davis' doctoral program at Curtin University, which has been producing some very fine writers of late: Yvette Walker's *Letters to the End of Love*, published last year to critical acclaim and shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Award, came from the same program.

Davis says a friend of hers who was a sales rep for Hachette asked if he could take the book to an editor. "So I gave him a copy. I was three days into my trip when I got an email that they'd read it and loved it. Within a couple of weeks (the contract) was all done. When everything was finalised I went and sat in a bar. I started talking to

people. By the end of the night everyone in the bar had bought me a drink."

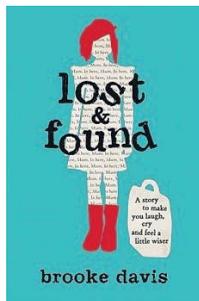
The reasons for celebration seem to have grown: *Lost & Found* caused a sensation at this year's London Book Fair and it's been sold, at last count, to more than 20 countries. This success has meant a great deal to Davis. "The loveliest thing about it is that I can be a full-time writer now. I can say I'm a writer and actually spend time writing and not have to do it in between jobs or before I go to work or go to bed."

*Lost & Found* is about three people thrown together by circumstances, and who must go on a journey to find the insight they need to understand their lives. There's seven-year-old Millie Bird, whose mother abandoned her in a department store; elderly Agatha Pantha, who hasn't left her house since her husband died seven



years ago; and the even more elderly Karl the Touch Typist, a romantic escapee from an aged-care nursing home. They must cope with the changes loss has brought to their lives — and try to understand the part death plays in life.

For Millie, that understanding begins with this: “Everyone knows everything about being born and no-one knows anything about being dead.” Karl would agree. He’d never talked to Evie, his wife, about her funeral. “Why would he? It was just too hard to get the words out.” Agatha



Pantha just sticks to her rigid routine and never goes out. Then they find themselves travelling to Kalgoorlie together on a bus. “It’s a book about how people cope with death, the different paths they take,” Davis says.

The seven years motif in the book is significant. Davis

found out about her own mother’s death in a car accident seven years ago while Davis was travelling in Vietnam. The feelings of loss in part gave rise to *Lost & Found*.

“The book was a great way to express myself about that time but I don’t feel that I’d ever get rid of that,” Davis says. “I always want to keep that feeling because it reminds me of my mum when she was alive.” As does continuing to drive her mum’s old car.

*Lost & Found*, which Davis says is “very much a work of fiction but about something fundamental to people”, took five years to write, five years of constant revision.

“I wrote the first draft and had no idea what was happening by the end. I had to go back and work out the point of it all. I probably wrote 200,000 to 300,000 words to end up with a 60,000-word novel.”

The painstaking care that went into the novel is evident in the poetic, economical prose. There is not a word wasted. The narrative bounces from one character to another, revealing their viewpoints and attitudes.

In the hands of a lesser author, this could be distracting or confusing. But Davis handles it with a grace and surety that belies the fact this is her first novel — almost. She did write a novel when she was 10. But that was an adventure story and has been lost to time.

In the foreword to *Lost & Found*, Davis writes: “I wanted to explore what it meant to grieve, not as a process that begins and

ends and is only about sadness, but as a part of life. As something that we have to work out how to live with, in among everything else there is — the good, the bad, the indifferent.”

Even though it is a book that deals with death and grief, it is not sombre or heavy. The characters are too quirky, their solutions to problems too eccentric, the situations and secondary characters too often verging on the fantastic. Rather, it is a novel that dances on the wire between heartache and joy, a delight to the reader in its explorations of the unexpected results of an eccentric road trip.

Davis is currently working on another novel but “it’s very early days yet”. Certainly, there will be no sequel. “I’m very much done with this book and these characters,” she declares.

Given the painstaking way Davis works and the fact that “now I’m a writer, I just don’t have enough time to write”, the new book may be some time coming.

However long the wait, it’ll be worth it.

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**Lost & Found** is published by Hachette (\$27). See [beaufortstreetbooks.com.au](http://beaufortstreetbooks.com.au) for coming events.



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**OVERSEAS SALES** Success means Brooke Davis can now be a full-time writer.