

Q&A WITH TRENT DALTON

Tell us how *Lola in the Mirror* came to be.

I can start by telling you what I wanted the book to feel like. There is this incredibly personal and intimate and sometimes terrifying thing that we do every day: I'm talking about looking into the mirror. That deeply confronting moment when it's all quiet and still and you look deep inside yourself and you see all of your irretrievable past, all of your tricky present and all your possible futures.

I then had a seed of a moment for a meeting between two lovers. A young thief transfixed by an image she sees in the bedroom she is robbing. This moment was something I had never read before, and I got very excited about it. It gave me the chills down my spine that I'm always searching for before I embark on the long and twisting highway walk that is the writing of a novel. It takes place in the middle of the book, so I kind of moved narratively backwards and forwards from that one beautiful moment.

How would you describe your novel?

Lola in the Mirror is for anyone who ever felt like they were going to collapse under the weight of sorrow. The book is also for all those beautiful souls who help us carry that weight. It's an art story. It's a crime story. It's a mystery novel. And it's a life story. I hope people will read this, get to the end and realise why I wrote *Love Stories* and sat on a Brisbane street corner watching people and asking them about love, loss and belonging for three months. That was in fact a research project. *Lola in the Mirror* is first and foremost a love story.

The protagonist, a young girl with no name, has been on the run with her mother for sixteen years and finally finds herself living in a Brisbane scrapyard. Why is homelessness such a key theme in this book?

It's the story of the seventeen years I spent writing social affairs journalism across this country. I was trying to figure out how it was that 120,000 people sleep rough each night in one of the brightest, luckiest countries in the world. As many as 19,000 children experienced homelessness on the last Census night. The book is filled with stories told to me by people sleeping rough across Brisbane city, the people living in the nooks and the crannies and the cracks of life. But how do you write about the hard things that really matter in a way that someone might want to read them? Well, I turned to my heroes. Dickens. Steinbeck. Shakespeare. Writers who so beautifully captured the social worlds around them and filled their stories with crime and mystery and drama and villains and fate and action and love and made us never want to leave their literary worlds.

The hero at the heart of *Lola in the Mirror* considers herself not homeless, but 'houseless'. She has a home that she has found within a homeless community. A scrapyard filled with a kind of family she has fallen into. In that rough old scrapyard she has found a sanctuary in which she can dream up the best possible version of herself. Safe enough to imagine. Safe enough to dream. Safe enough to become anything she wants to be. Every kid deserves a place like that.

Please share with us your writing process.

My process at the beginning of a book is always strange and fraught and full of gut discoveries. I usually spend weeks going through this dorky document I've got on my computer entitled 'A Trent Dalton Story'. It's about 120 pages long and filled with every big and little fictional story idea I've ever had since I was about seventeen years old. Endless sentences and paragraphs of uncooked plots with

asterisks next to them. The more asterisks I put near the idea, the more I like the idea. Then the gut comes in and some idea will start stirring and then I'm trying to work that idea in my head until my back comes into it: the spine starts doing its thing and the tingles start to tell me that I have something that I need to keep thinking about for the next year. Then I spend six to eight hours a day, usually stopping at high school pick-up time, trying to honour that beautiful thing my gut first told me.

For Lola in the Mirror, I walked all the streets the characters walk, taking over three hundred photographs of the very real cracks in the footpaths, the murals, graffiti, homeless shelters, trees etc. Endless snapshots of life in my city. Then I printed all these photographs out at Officeworks and stuck them to the wall of my downstairs writing room. I brought the world of out there into the world in here. So that's my writing space. Then the routine starts. Drop the kids at school, go for a run, then fix a boiled egg and slice it up over one piece of avocado toast and make a strong coffee. I write solidly from 9am to 3pm, stopping halfway to eat a can of John West tuna while doom-scrolling. Repeat daily for roughly six months and you might look up one day and realise you have yourself a book.

How do you get the voice and perspective just right for your young female protagonist?

You want to understand a seventeen-year-old protagonist for your four-hundred-page novel? Work from the inside out. Start at the heart that makes her love then move to the belly that makes her hungry and the legs that make her run and the brain that makes her dream. Then, when you know all that inside stuff, move to the voice and listen carefully to what she wants to tell you.

What significance does the act of looking into a mirror hold for you?

When I was a boy I used to look in the mirror and see wondrous versions of my future self staring back at me. Imagined versions of me. I saw a great rugby league player for a while there. Then I started to see some crossed version of my heroes – Daniel Day-Lewis, George Orwell and Eddie Vedder – walking on the arm of Winona Ryder. But then I turned fifteen and the reality of my life started erasing all these possible versions of me. Life and a dozen depressing adult parts of it – drugs, drink, unemployment, sorrow, loss, rage, regret – entered my thinking, seemingly permanently, and all I started to see was my present self. And I didn't like what I saw. I didn't like how sad that kid looked when he stared back at me. So I stopped looking in the mirror for any real length of time. Didn't want to. Didn't need to. Didn't feel like anything was going to change for the kid staring back at me.

Lola represents a reason for the hero of my book to keep looking in the mirror. A reason to keep dreaming.

If you weren't a writer, what do you think you would be doing?

I daresay I'd be in a small industrial warehouse in Virginia, Brisbane, boxing car parts and sending them to various mechanical workshops across Queensland. I did that job for a year before I decided I wanted to be a writer. On my last day, my boss – a hard but beautiful man – gave me a farewell gift: a gold ballpoint Parker pen.