

Elsewhere in Success

Iris Lavell

About the Book

Harry and Louisa look like an ordinary couple. They live in an ordinary house in an ordinary street in a suburb called Success.

Amongst the whirl of back-shed power tools and suburban birdsong, Louisa struggles to recover from the loss of her son Tom and from the earlier disintegration of a troubled and difficult marriage. Louisa is in therapy for her grief and trauma, but the act of unearthing old wounds sometimes seems more painful than refusing to face them at all.

Meanwhile Harry struggles to connect with a partner who is fragile and increasingly withdrawn. He begins to muse on his own regrets, failed relationships, and missed opportunities.

But each of them contains small sparks of resilience and hopefulness. They have a small and doughty dog called Buster and a slightly dinged Buddha in the garden. And they have each other. Once you open your eyes, there are small consolations, and sometimes even miracles, to be found in the diurnal and the mundane.

Elsewhere in Success is a deceptively quiet love story about suburban lives, and second chances, a celebration and affirmation of the beauty of the ordinary and the every day.

From the Author

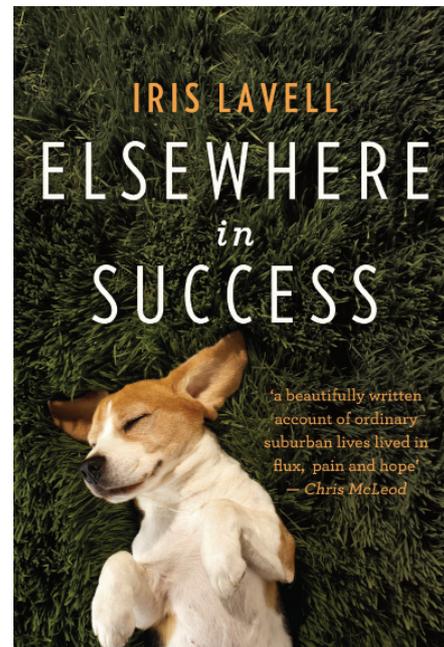
This is your first novel. Are the characters recent incarnations, or have they been developing for a long time?

It's a difficult question to answer. Both, in a way. With this novel I started with a setting not unlike the one in which I live with my partner and our dog, and used bits and pieces of things that have happened to us in different circumstances – walks along the beach, watching the ANZAC day parade, the fact that my partner did national service, the mundane day-to-day of suburban life – to build into something fictional. I wasn't sure what shape that would take, but I kept writing until I started making decisions about alternative backstories for Harry and Louisa to those of our own. At this point the characters really began to diverge from the real and take shape in a fictional form.

The characters continued to emerge as I worked on the novel, a period of nearly five years from the first word to the completion of the copyediting process, and new things kept occurring to me right until then, and will probably continue to do so until the next novel takes hold of me. Each situation that they were made to negotiate played into aspects of character development, how they appeared, what they thought, and the decisions that they made in the context of the story. I didn't tamper too much with the dog. The model for Buster, a dog called Hamish, was a red heeler, quite a character, but he's passed on now, unfortunately.

This is a novel set firmly and unapologetically in suburbia. The title reinforces this, and the leitmotif of the buried lawnmower confirms it. In what ways was the suburban setting important to you, and to your characters?

Again that was a decision made early on, to write what I could see around me. It felt right for the story, and influenced what happened, the kind of pressure of being in close proximity to others, and the characters having to modify their own behaviour as a result, alternately hiding and exposing themselves, which leads to a kind of double life. So in that way, the setting was an important part of the story. I like the idea of novels capturing a record of the details of a particular place at a particular time. And I liked the idea of writing about a suburb that is further away from the city too, because it has its own character. Outer suburbs have a different feel from the inner suburbs. Success is a real suburb, and I thought it was too good a name to pass up.



You mention many familiar landmarks scattered around Perth and Fremantle. Do any of the places you have written about hold a special significance for you?

On my first date with my partner – over thirteen years ago now – he brought his dog with him and we went for a walk up to the Round House. I don't think you're supposed to take dogs up there. There were a couple of men playing the didgeridoo on the top of the hill and there was a lovely little interaction similar to that described in the book. Hamish the dog died a couple of years ago, so it's nice to have captured that bit of his life. And I often go up to Kings Park with family, so I have nice associations with Kings Park.

This is a novel that explores the fragile emotional terrain of people who are bereaved, traumatised and grieving. To what extent did your own experiences as a psychologist contribute to the content of this novel and to the way you approached its writing?

It had an influence, but one thing that I was quite conscious of was not to write the book as a psychologist, or to write from that mindset. So in writing this novel, I had to discard a lot, not only of that discipline of thinking, but of that style of writing. On a day-to-day basis I have done a lot of report writing. Psychological report writing is very formal and quite cagey in its style, and to some extent that is informed by how we are trained to approach psychology. The report conventions are designed to be respectful of the people we see by ensuring that we write objectively and without jumping to conclusions, or judging what we hear. This is good for work as a psychologist, but not so good for dramatic effect, because it is too even-handed in its approach. So in writing a story I think you have to play the devil's advocate sometimes. In writing a novel I think you sometimes have to write things you don't believe yourself, to stir things up. Of course, my experience as a psychologist couldn't help but inform my perspective.

I respect the people I see in the context of my work, and I care about them. People are often incredibly courageous and resilient in the face of extreme life circumstances. I've been a psychologist since the mid-eighties. I think that to some extent, we become what we do, and in that way I have become a psychologist, which is not what I set out to be when I left school. I was always intending to become a writer, but I've taken the circuitous route. I have learnt things from my work, so hopefully some of this has translated to a certain amount of insight. In some ways I wanted the counsellor in the book to be as flawed as Harry and Louisa, because I didn't want to give the impression that given the particular mix of circumstances, anyone would have done better than Louisa. The counsellor got spruced up as I continued writing, so I'm not sure how much that comes across. Still, I think she had to, as a kind of counterbalance. In this book, as in my work as a psychologist, I've also reflected on my personal experiences of grief, to help me make an honest connection with the situation in which Harry and Louisa find themselves.

Did you have the reader in mind as you explored some of these themes?

I think I did. I wrote with a certain amount of trepidation about who might read the book if it ever got published, but I think initially I didn't expect that my first novel would be published, so that gave me a certain amount of courage to explore some difficult subjects, not to mention some bad language and sexual references. I tried to be really honest with myself about what I felt or thought, to recognise my own prejudices, and then to either avoid being judgemental or, in some places in the story, to write in a more judgemental manner than I feel. I consciously brought elements of unfairness into the characters themselves, to write that ambiguity that is in all of us. I wanted to leave the reader with some hope. And I tried not to write things that would compound any pain that a potential reader might have already experienced. So much of that is about trying to second-guess what another person might be thinking, or feeling, as they read. I've given up on that. I'm usually wrong.

Do you think that fiction can play a restorative role for readers who may have had experiences like Louisa's or Harry's?

I hope so, but at least I hope it does no harm. It wasn't the primary aim when I started the book, which was more selfish than that. I love to create worlds with words – I think that's interesting in itself, and I like the challenge of it. I wanted to see if I could write a novel. But I think anything that provides alternative ways of thinking about something is potentially useful. It would be good if the story opened up some discussion amongst readers about these kinds of experiences, because discussion might lead to a better understanding, as much, or more, for people who haven't experienced these things, than for those that have. I think social concerns will always come into my writing at some level.

Did you find that the gender of your character affected or influenced your exploration of emotional terrain and old traumas?

Yes, because people are heavily influenced by the social context in which they are raised and continue to live, and gender identification is a big part of that. But underneath all that, I don't think that what men or women feel or think, is so very different. Individual women and men vary quite a lot, and there's quite a lot of overlap across the genders.

What's next for Iris Lavell?

I'm working on another novel which is quite different from this one. At the moment it is being written from the point of view of a young child, and the setting is in the country. I'll have to see where it goes.

Questions for Discussion

- While contemplating the statue of Buddha, Louisa feels she is '*attracted to the idea of non-attachment*' (p. 26). Why is this important to Louisa? In what ways does she confuse non-attachment with detachment?
- Louisa struggles to be free of the pain inflicted by grief and abuse. In your opinion, can these wounds, once suffered, ever truly disappear?
- '*Each judgemental idea embraces its enemy*' (p. 27). How does the author influence your judgement of the characters? Who do you judge most harshly, and why?
- Why does Louisa believe '*you can justify anything at all, even if it is highly destructive*' (p. 27)? What destructive behaviours do the characters justify, and how?
- What is the best way to accommodate the past in the present? Do either Harry or Louisa achieve this?
- How would you describe the relationship between Harry and Louisa? In what ways is their mode of relating defined by what each has experienced before?
- Harry feels women are '*equal, but different*' (p. 38). How is this difference articulated in the novel, and what effect does this belief have on Harry's and Louisa's actions?
- Louisa asks Harry if mateship includes women. How are the friendships between the women played out in the novel? Do you think women are capable of 'mateship', or is it a purely masculine concept?
- '*Sex changes a woman somehow*' (p. 179). How do Harry and Louisa's experiences and opinions on sex differ, and what is the reason for this difference?
- What is the role of Lucy in the novel as a 'support character' to Louisa? Would Louisa have been able to progress positively as a character without the assistance of her psychologist?
- Harry is a haphazard drifter. He has let things slide and slip away from him. Do you think that Harry has changed across time? Does he achieve any evolution in the course of the novel?
- What are the comedic elements of this novel? What is their function?
- What other elements of comfort and redemption do you identify here?
- What is the role of suburbia itself in the novel?
- What is the role of the man in the van, and other chance encounters with different characters?
- Do Harry and Louisa live within a community? How might this community be defined?
- What is the significance of the Buddha's destruction at the end of the novel?
- What is the 'meaning' of the final scene?