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CHANGING scripts

Medicine and literature appear to be polar opposite pursuits. Julie Hosking meets two doctor friends whose debut novels prove otherwise.

Louise Allan

When Louise Allan's children started winning a few writing prizes at primary school, the naturally proud mother wasn't taking any of the credit.

"People asked 'Where do they get their writing talent from', and I'd say 'Not from me, I haven't got a creative bone in my body'," the then GP recalls. "That's what I said to everybody. I just thought I was science and maths."

Turns out doctor doesn't always know best. Louise is now an author, her debut novel *The Sisters' Song* – set in Tasmania over 70 years – out this month.

"I'd done general practice and knowing a little bit about everything with four kids is hard to keep on top of, so I went into breast cancer work," she says.

But as director of the clinic, the stress of juggling the needs of four children, now aged 15, 17, 19 and 21, with work was becoming too much. "At 11pm I'd be pegging out clothes after I'd finished dictating my notes, after I'd raced around getting kids from school and to after-school activities," she says. "I had a nanny but as soon as I'd pull up, the kids would all be on me with all the things they'd saved from the day to tell me all at once. And I'd just had a busy day and want five minutes to myself ... in the end, I thought 'This is it, I'm stopping work'."

The 51-year-old knew that she wasn't the sort of person who could fill her days with morning teas or tennis. "I had to do something to keep me going intellectually," she says. "I think I just felt the urge to write, I don't know what it was."

So she did an online writing course and was hooked. "As soon as it was let out, that was it, the exhilaration of it – of being your real self. By the time I'd finished that course I knew I wanted to write a novel. We had to write our goals and I had that within a year I'd have a written novel!"

That was in 2010 and suffice to say *The Sisters' Song* is a vastly different story to the one she began all those years ago. "I have 190,000 words in my offcuts.



But they helped get the novel. It wasn't wasted."

Louise moved to Perth from her birthplace of Tasmania with her husband Scott 17 years ago and it was to Tassie she returned for the setting of her first novel, though she says she now feels West Australian.

Ida and Nora are raised by an increasingly embittered mother in the late 1920s. Unable to cope with the death of her husband, she mostly ignores her daughters, leaving Ida to do her best to care for her increasingly wayward sister. While Ida eventually settles into married life with husband Len – the men in *The Sisters' Song* are very good souls – dreaming of a brood of children, Nora wants nothing more than to travel the world as a professional singer. Life has other plans for both.

"It is kind of based on my family tree. Ida is based on my father's mother and Nora is my mother's mother. I did have these two grandmothers, one who absolutely loved kids and was absolutely devoted to her own and us, her grandchildren, and the other who ... once we were adults, we were fine, but as kids we just annoyed her."

Louise's grandfather was also a sawmiller like Nora's husband Alf, and met a similar fate (which won't be revealed here in the interests of future readers). "I grew up hearing lots about him and I

guess because it was still quite fresh in people's minds what had happened," she says. "The book is kind of a tribute to all the people who came before me."

An early version was short-listed for the T.A.G Hungerford Prize for emerging authors in 2014, but there were still many changes ahead. She would often take her beloved dogs, Labrador Leisel and golden retriever Gretel (yes, they are named for *Sound of Music* characters), for walks to clear inevitable writer's block.

"I sent it to my now agent and she said it's too depressing, you need to rewrite the ending, and Nora, she's irredeemable ... you've got to do something about it. I tried to get some sympathy for her, or tried to work out what it was that made her like what she was, so I just kept writing."

That push and pull of motherhood explored so beautifully, and often heart-wrenchingly, in *The Sisters' Song*, is something Louise, who has a fraught relationship with her own mother, has felt herself.

"We want children and we're biologically built to have them but then there is also ambition, career," she says. "Ida and Nora are kind of opposites but really I don't think there are too many women who don't have a bit of Nora in them. I certainly do. When I used to watch my husband walk out the door to

work and I'd be left holding the baby I just so wanted to swap places with him. You love your kids and you want to be with them but at the same time you've got these things you want to do for yourself."

While Louise was happy to be exploring her passion, she also felt guilty about taking the time to write, particularly given her husband's demanding job as a respiratory physician. "You want that time to devote to your writing and immerse yourself in it, like go to Tasmania for a week, but that costs money and that means your husband is left with four kids to run to and from school, as well as work full time," she says. "And you're asking them to make sacrifices with no guarantee at the end that you'll get published and you feel guilty asking them to do it."

When Scott finally read it, however, he was overcome. "He came up to me at the end and he was crying, he was very proud. He didn't realise what it took to write a book."

Along what at times seemed like a never-ending journey, the debut author has been also buoyed by a community of like-minded souls, in particular her writers' group of fellow doctors Michelle Johnston, whose debut novel is out next month (see story right), and Jacqui Garton-Smith, a GP for whom Louise is sure publication is just around the corner.

"I couldn't have done it without them. It wouldn't have got published because I had no idea what I was doing," she says. "I emailed them and I said 'I'm really serious about getting published, do you want to join a group, the three of us, swap feedback and help each other to the finish line'. I thought they might say no because they're both still working but they both said 'Yep, definitely, I'm in'. That was a couple of years ago now."

The budding authors would rewrite chapters and send them to each other, swapping feedback in person. "Our writing group works particularly well because we're all doctors and we kind of have that shared history and get each other, and we like each other's writing because we have things in common."

Having once pigeonholed herself in the scientific realm, Louise now believes it takes both sides of the brain to write a book. "I think you need all of that uncensored, unfettered creative input to start with. But at another time you need to come in with that mathematical brain and go 'Right I need to structure this, does this make sense', and follow it logically through to the end."

And she still can't quite believe that she made it to the end of a book that was personal on so many different levels. "I had a sister who was killed in a car accident in 1987, she was 19. It was pretty devastating at the time, we were very close. So it was nice to have

two sisters in the novel," she says. "Ida's Children was my working title and the publisher changed it to *The Sisters' Song*. I thought 'I quite like that', it's kind of a tribute to my sister, too." ■



The Sisters' Song
(Allen and Unwin,
\$30) is out now.