

In TWO MINDS

For the most part, writing is deemed a solitary pursuit. But these three writing duos prove that, sometimes, teamwork can create a magic of its own.

NICCI FRENCH: TALES OF INTIMATE DREAD

British husband-and-wife team Nicci Gerrard and Sean French have been writing psychological thrillers together since 1996. To date, they have xx titles to their name. Or, rather, Nicci French does. So what made them decide on a singular pseudonym rather than having both their names on the cover? ‘We always knew we wanted one name on the cover,’ Sean says. ‘And the reason we went with Nicci

French is actually very pedestrian. Years ago, when we were journalists, we had this idea for a thriller based on the notion of recovered memory. You know, where people in therapy recovered traumatic hidden memories from their past. And so, because that phenomenon overwhelmingly happened to women in therapy, the protagonist in our first book, *The Memory Game*, was a woman. And because a woman was telling the story, it just seemed logical to have a female name on the book.’

After trying and failing to come up with a clever pseudonym, they eventually just settled on Nicci’s first name and Sean’s second. ‘If our first book had had a male protagonist it might have gone a completely different way,’ he says. Not that they have ruled out a future book by Sean Gerrard. ‘We do sometimes think, you know, maybe there is a Sean Gerrard lurking,’ Nicci says, smiling. ‘Maybe if there’s an idea that feels like it needs to have a male narrator or a male sensibility.’

BY LIESL ROBERTSON

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Choosing Nicci French, however, helped them find their combined voice. ‘It has completely shaped the way that we write,’ Nicci says. ‘Nicci French has a female sensibility. She sees the world through female eyes. The first 12 books that we wrote had a female narrator. Since then we’ve had a more indirect first person consciousness, but it’s still the world as experienced by women and seen by women.’

‘If you make a decision to write books with women at the centre, you get a different kind of thriller,’ Sean says. ‘Just walking down the street is a different experience depending on whether you’re a man or a woman, just in the way you’re looked at... You’re more likely to be picked on... I think we’ve explored that in lots of different ways.’

Most of their stories are ‘tales of intimate dread’: stories about one misstep that sets off a chain reaction. ‘We’re really interested in what happens when an ordinary person is suddenly faced with something terrible,’ Sean says. ‘Our stories come out of the what-ifs. We’re always looking at the world with that in mind: the way one bit of bad luck or one decision can cause someone’s life to unravel. Most of our characters have been thrown into a world of crime and they’re forced to be detectives in their own lives – but they’re not very good at it. They make a mess of it, and they put themselves in danger.’

‘Although Sean and I have very different ways of being in the world, we both feel that sense of the precariousness of life,’ Nicci says. ‘How everybody is a few steps away from their life being upended and darkness sweeping over them. When people feel in control of their life, probably that’s a lot to do with luck. We don’t write about Manichean worlds of good and evil, you know, of saints and sinners, of villains. We

Sean French and Nicci Gerrard, who write together as Nicci French

write much more about ambiguous, murky things. Everybody carries it within themselves, the ability to do terrible things and to do wonderful things. Everyone is kind of both monstrous and miraculous.’

Nicci and Sean have even gone as far as describing their process as a *folie à deux* (‘madness of two’), a phenomenon in which two people urge each other on to commit far more serious crimes than either would perpetrate alone. Nicci and Sean love spurring each other on – ‘a bit further into the darkness, a bit closer to the edge of the abyss than we would have dared on our own!’

‘The reason that we keep on writing together is because it’s continually unexpected,’ Nicci says. ‘There is very little that’s more intimate than seeing inside

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Novels do not get written just by a moment of inspiration – it’s by turning up, and working every day.”

somebody else’s really strange imagination. So it’s not that Sean has come up with a kind of gruesome plot twist or has revealed things about himself that I didn’t know. It’s not as literal as that. But the more I write with Sean, the stranger he is to me, in a sense. And that’s why it works. And that’s why relationships work, because you never quite get to the end of knowing somebody.’

‘I’d say the times where we shocked each other, it’s not so much that Nicci’s written something so violent that I couldn’t believe it,’ Sean explains. ‘It’s more like... for example, we did the book *Killing Me Softly*, which is about this woman who walks out of her very safe, normal life and gets involved with a very dangerous, violent, attractive, charismatic man. I think we were both pushing each other, in the *folie à deux* idea, not in how sexually explicit we could be but more in how far we could push this feeling of dread.’ Unsurprisingly, he says, this is also the one book of theirs that their children *haven’t* read. ‘You don’t want to read what your parents wrote about sexual obsession!’

They are well aware of the irony of their situation: a married couple writing about relationships that have gone down a dark path.

‘We’ve been married for 33 years. We spend most days together. And for the most part we get on very well. But then we spend most of our time writing domestic noir; we’re writing about terrible things that happen in intimate relationships,’ Nicci says. ‘And about the essential loneliness of each person and the secret selves of each person that nobody has access to. So there’s a dramatic irony about that: being a couple writing about how terrifying it is to be a couple – and often how solitary people are within relationships.’

‘I think it makes sense because in writing together as Nicci French we’re so bound up with each other, Sean says. ‘When you work so closely with someone, you make yourself so vulnerable to them. One of the things we’ve talked about so much is that, growing up, we’re told: beware of strangers. But the people who can really hurt you are the people closest to you. If you’re

a woman, you’re most likely to be killed by a partner or an ex-partner. And, just more generally, the people who are likely to damage you in your life are not your so-called enemies or some stranger, but people in your circle. That’s the sort of territory we find fascinating.’

Despite their careers being inextricably bound, their writing process relies on having the space to write separately. Nicci potters around the house between bouts of writing, whereas Sean has to isolate himself in the shed to get work done. Not that they haven’t tried writing in the same room.

‘At the very end of our first book, we thought it would be this symbolic act: we’d write the last chapter together,’ Nicci says. ‘It was horrible. It took forever and we argued all the time.’

They have since ironed out their process. First, they discuss and plan out the basic plot – usually when they are on holiday, hiking together, walking and talking. ‘We have to find the ideas and know where we’re both going and then leave each other alone to be in that kind of magic solitary space of writing,’ Nicci says. Once they have a basic outline, one of them will start, write a chapter and email it to the other person. That person will then edit that chapter and write the next one. One rule that they have is that they are not ‘allowed’ to question the things the other person has cut, or complain when they’ve murdered your darlings. ‘You have to lick your wounds in private,’ Nicci says.

In the end, it comes down to trust. ‘When I look at other people who’ve tried to write together and have failed, that’s why they failed – because it turned into a power struggle,’ Sean says. ‘Someone is trying to dominate too much or they

just have a row about something. Sometimes we’ll have discussions about really big decisions in the book. But for the most part we’re constantly rewriting each other and cutting each other. And if I felt that Nicci was trying to write her own book that she had in mind all along, the whole thing would collapse. If we didn’t have that trust. We’re just like any other couple: we squabble and have stupid arguments. But in this one particular area of our life, we have always been... not mature, just professional, really.’

‘It’s also just knowing there’s so much at stake,’ Nicci says. ‘If we start distrusting each other, our world will fall apart. Everything hangs on that, and we both know that.’

‘We never say who’s written which bit of the novel. It’s one of the very few rules that we have. But sometimes when we do readings I actually can’t remember who wrote which bit. It was born out of a shared imagination; it belongs to both of us.’

They have also learnt that they do better if they don’t share the same workspace. ‘We tried it once – it exposed that we have very different working habits,’ Nicci says. ‘What Nicci means is her very *good* habits and my very *bad* habits,’ Sean quips.

‘I got to my little desk quite early in the morning and then Sean wandered in a bit later and very nicely offered me a cup of coffee. And then he asked me if I wanted *another* cup of coffee. Then he kind of sat down and muttered a few things and gave me a crossword clue to do. And then he looked out the window and said, “What’s that bird?” And so we had to look it up in the bird book. And then he asked me, “What are we having for lunch?” and then “What are we gonna have for dinner?” And then he

thought it was time for a cup of tea. And then he said, “I’ve just had the best idea. We should learn Russian together!” And that was it.’

As a couple that also works together, you would assume they must have firm boundaries between their personal and professional lives. But, in fact, the opposite is true. ‘As a writer, you’re never *not* available for ideas,’ Nicci says. ‘In a way, your imagination never stops working away at things. And often the best ideas happen when you’re least expecting them, so your windows always have to be open. We don’t have weeks and weekends. Often, we go on holiday and we work on holiday, but it’s a pleasure and a privilege that we can have that kind of life. But if you’re asking how we organise ourselves, we don’t really. We do it all the time, in whatever form it comes.’

‘Novels, of whatever kind, do not get written just by a moment of inspiration – it’s by turning up, and working every day,’ Sean says. ‘But you also have to be open. We were about halfway through another book when the idea for *Killing Me Softly* came up and we got so excited about it that we abandoned months and months of work and just started doing that. So you’ve always got to be available – but also not *too* available, because everything you’re *not* writing always seems more interesting or more enticing than the thing you’re writing.’

‘You need to be both disciplined and wild, somehow,’ Nicci says. ‘Which is quite a nice way to be in life, disciplined and wild.’

They also spend quite a bit of time doing research, whether it’s visiting prisons, wandering the streets of London or watching trials. ‘I can tell you the weirdest piece of research we’ve done,’ Nicci says.

‘For a book called *Land of the Living*, somebody had their arms tied behind their back and they had to wriggle out from under their legs. And so we had to work out if this was actually possible.’

‘So I had to tie Nicci up,’ Sean says, laughing. (In case you were wondering, she did manage to escape.)

Going into a prison was another experience that deeply affected both of them. ‘I couldn’t have portrayed it without feeling what it’s like, with all the locking doors and the claustrophobia and the smell of it,’ Sean says. ‘Obviously, you’re being taken in by the authorities, so you’re being given a kind of sanitised view, but they can’t change what the feeling is like.’

Thrillers are about ‘exploring fears in a safe way’ and leading the reader out of the situation with a sense of resolution. But not every loose end is tied up. When I ask about a specific plot point from one of their books that kept me up at night, they both laugh and give me opposing answers.

‘We want every reader to have their own opinions on that,’ Sean says. ‘I think the whole point of that scene is that *I* don’t know either,’ Nicci says. ‘And she’ll never know. Most loose ends are tied up; you know what happened. But then there’s this little abyss of uncertainty, this little black hole at the heart of the novel. We won’t know. And we’ll never know.’

‘The resolution is an imperative;



that’s a contract with the reader. But because we’re writing about this kind of murky, grey world, there will always be some uncertainty and small things that aren’t resolved. Just because it is about motive. It’s about the weirdness of the human character, about the kind of strangeness of what it is to be alive and make decisions and have relationships. I think our books need those areas of ambiguity and uncertainty.’

‘We want to write books that can be read more than once,’ Sean adds. ‘So it’s not just, oh right, now you know who did it. It’s not just a crossword puzzle.’



The latest Nicci French book, *Has Anyone Seen Charlotte Salter?*, is due out in xxxx 2024.



CHRISTINA LAUREN: HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Christina Hobbs and
Lauren Billings, who
write under the pen
name Christina Lauren

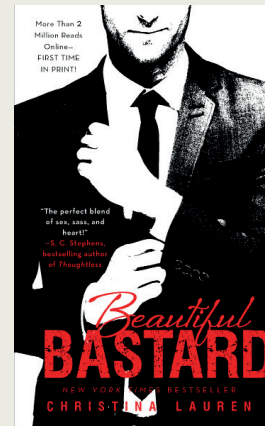
US-based romance writers Christina Hobbs and Lauren Billings (or Lo, as Christina affectionately calls her) have the easy repartee of two people who have been friends for years. They met in 2009 – on a *Twilight* fanfiction forum. ‘We both came to fandom for totally different reasons and at different times,’ Lauren says. ‘Christina started reading fanfic in 2008. She was recovering from surgery, so she was laid up and bored. And so she found the fanfiction forums, and she was like, “What is *this* magic?”’ Lauren had been writing

fanfiction as a hobby for most of her life, and joined in because she wanted to rewrite *Breaking Dawn*, the last book in Stephenie Meyer’s series. ‘I didn’t like the way the series ended,’ she says. ‘And I was there to “right a wrong” in my head, you know. But we started reading each other’s stories and we just really liked each other’s style. And so in 2009, that summer, I invited her to ComicCon to be on a panel about fanfiction and fan art. And that’s when we met in person.’

The two hit it off immediately, and decided to try writing together. Then, in 2011, *Fifty Shades of Grey* was published – a book that started off as *Twilight* fanfiction. ‘By that

point, we were writing as Christina Lauren but we hadn’t sold a book yet,’ Christina says. ‘We had an agent and we were working on a YA book. I started getting all these emails from people asking if I was interested in publishing *The Office*, which was the *Twilight* fanfic I had written. I wasn’t. I felt like people had already read it and I was doing something else. And then one day I got a call from a friend who works in publishing. She said, “Are you publishing *The Office*? Because it just came across my desk, but it has different names. And I assume it’s not you who sent it.”’

‘We hadn’t told our agent that we wrote fanfiction because at that point



people didn’t take it seriously. It’s so different now – now, publishers seek out people who are writing fanfic because they already have a platform. We eventually told our agent, Holly, and she was like, “Okay, wait. So you’re telling me that you were sort of a big deal online? What’s wrong with that?”’

Holly suggested that they take ownership of *The Office*: clean it up and put it back online, under the name Christina Lauren. ‘I didn’t want to,’ Christina says. ‘It was the first thing I ever wrote. It was terrible. And so I said to Lo, “Listen, if you want to take this and make it your own, go ahead.” She chopped it up, rewrote it, and when she sent it back to me, it felt like something completely different. Holly asked if she could show it to a couple of people – and 12 hours later we had an offer on it. Only about 20% of the original story remained, and it just took on an entirely different life as *Beautiful Bastard*, which is our first book.’

‘That would not have happened if *Fifty Shades* hadn’t been so huge and people weren’t looking for the next *Fifty Shades*,’ Lauren says. ‘We had no intention of publishing our fic.’

At this point, both Lauren and Christina were still employed full time in completely different fields: Christina was working at a junior high counselling office and Lauren

was doing research. ‘I have my doctorate in neuroscience, and I was doing research on cognition and retinal degeneration. I had been in science for many, many years. I thought that I would be doing that for the rest of my life. Writing was my favourite thing to do in my free time, but you never assume that the hobby you love is going to turn into a career.’

In 2013, they published *six* books – while both still juggling their other careers. ‘I had a 3- and a 6-year-old, and Christina had a 13-year-old; it was just insane,’ Lauren says.

‘That entire year is a blur,’ Christina says, shaking her head. ‘With complete sincerity, I’m not sure *how* we did it. It got to a point where it felt like we weren’t giving *anything* 100%: parenting, family, working, writing... But we just had to strike while the iron was hot.’

At the end of 2013, they quit their day jobs to write full time as Christina Lauren. ‘I think it was hard for both of us to leave our jobs, but when you get the chance to do whatever it is you love for a career, you can’t say no to that,’ Lauren says. They haven’t wasted a second: Christina Lauren will soon have 30 titles to her name. ‘If you don’t include *The Honeymoon Crashers*, which was an audio original, then the book that comes out in May is

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our 30th published book.’

When it comes to their writing process, no book is ever the same. ‘Every time we sit down to outline, we almost always do it together. That’s probably the only thing that is consistent,’ Christina says. ‘If it’s a book that we can do alternating chapters or alternating points of view, we’ll split it up and each write our parts and then put them on Google Docs or Dropbox so we can each read each other’s as we go. It depends on what the story is and how much time we have. But no matter what, we’re both in it, constantly. They’re both of ours.’

‘Because there’s two of us and we don’t want our books to feel disjointed, we spend a lot of time editing,’ Lauren says. ‘I think that’s always been our priority: making sure that everything feels as seamless as it can.’

Of course, they each have their strengths. Christina loves writing action sequences and descriptive scenes. ‘If you ever feel like you can actually *see* the scene that the characters are seeing, that’s usually Christina. She is also our research queen. She likes to know what her characters know so that she can get into their heads better. I am always in awe of the details that she’s able to sprinkle into the book so that it feels authentic.’

Lauren loves writing the emotional scenes. ‘I say this all the time. Sometimes when I read Lo’s writing, I wonder if we have the same vocabulary, because she has this way of clipping phrases together that my brain would never have come up with,’ Christina says. ‘I’m not a big crier when I read, and I cried so much during the last chapter of *The True Love Experiment*. It’s probably one of my favourite things that Lo has ever written. It’s just the most perfect ending that we have ever had in a book: the most

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Nobody is asking Stephen King if he is murdering people or blowing things up just for research.

well-earned and fitting and just so sweepingly romantic. I get the same feels as when I’m watching the end of *Pride & Prejudice*.’

‘We both tend to write the sex scenes,’ Lauren adds. ‘I love to write them, so if given the choice, I will always do it. But I do think we pride ourselves on being Janes of all trades. So if something emotional is happening in her chapter, she’ll crush it. If I have to write some action in my chapter, I will hopefully crush it. I think we can do either; there’s just stuff that we *like* to do.’

So do they ever disagree on where the plot needs to go? ‘This is not what you’re asking, but what’s funny is at signings and any kind of event, we get asked, without fail, whether we fight,’ Lauren says. ‘And I think people want to know if there’s mess there, which there’s not. But they also want to know, how can two people who are so close as friends also work together in any sort of harmony? Like, where is the strife? We are best friends. We are basically family. *So of course* we fight. We disagree about stuff that you disagree about with your sister or your best friend or your spouse. But the big disagreements never get that bad – and they’re also never about the books. I think part of it is that we started writing together after only knowing each other for four days. And so the friendship and the business partnership have grown together – there’s no separating them. Because of that, there are not these individual egos warring with each other about who’s right and who’s wrong. Neither of us digs our heels in, if that makes sense.’

‘I have to say I’m so glad that

we decided to write as Christina Lauren instead of Christina Hobbs and Lauren Billings,’ Christina adds. ‘Because everything we do is for Christina Lauren, this person that doesn’t really exist. None of the wins are for us individually; it’s for Christina Lauren.’

‘We have created this entity that has made all of these different creative projects,’ Lauren says. ‘I am not Christina Lauren; she’s not Christina Lauren; it’s something that only exists when we’re together.’

‘Writing is a very isolating profession. What we do requires overblown confidence, because you are assuming that you are telling stories that the world wants to hear, but at the same time it creates a very delicate ego because you have to be brave enough to put that story into someone else’s hands. I think writing alone can be very isolating and lonely, and can make you feel very insecure. So just at the outset, we don’t have that concern. I write for an audience of one. I write for Christina. If I make her laugh or swoon, or mad or feel things, I’ve succeeded. She is a lifelong reader and she’s a good predictor of what our readers will like. So it’s nice having that built-in safety.’

‘Beyond that, I think it’s nice having somebody who is always as invested as I am. Or as excited or stressed or exhausted or enthusiastic or inspired, because when you’re a creative person, you can wear out the people around you talking about the things that you’re working on. Most people don’t have the same depth of interest. I could talk to my husband about our books but after two hours he would just be like, “Oh my God, stop.” But I have

this person who never gets tired of it because this is her life too. So that’s pretty wonderful! And then there’s the other stuff: always having someone that you’re doing book tours with; if I’m stuck, she can help get me unstuck... There are a million things that are great.’

One of their most recent books, *The True Love Experiment*, is a love letter to their genre. The main character is a romance writer, and you immediately get the sense that her bugbears are things that Christina and Lauren have also had to face.

‘We’ve been asked if we do everything in our books for research,’ Lauren says, rolling her eyes. ‘And I can tell you nobody is asking Stephen King if he is murdering people or blowing things up just for research. We get asked if our husbands approve of what we do. If our fathers have read our books. The implication of the male permission that’s needed for this to be considered a legitimate career is totally laughable to me. Like, are you kidding me? My husband, first of all, I didn’t ask him if it was okay, but second of all, he’s delighted. He thinks this is awesome.’

‘I think this is something that romance has quietly and then more firmly been railing against for decades, which is that if women express enthusiasm for something, they are called hysterical; they are called rabid; they are called crazed. And, you know, men can go out to a sporting event in freezing weather with their chests painted blue and they’re called “loyal”, “hardcore”, “die-hard fans”. We don’t use the same terminology. And I think a lot of that is because we assign more intellectual or cultural value to the things that men tend to love, whether it’s sports or science fiction, whatever it is that has a larger male audience. And because romance

is about relationships and love and community, those things, for whatever reason, are seen as less valuable.

‘We came into romance in 2013, and we very quickly realised that this is a genre that literally keeps publishers’ doors open. It sells more than any other genre in fiction. It outsells thrillers by almost double. And this is a genre that is written primarily by and for women. That’s not true across the board, of course; there are male writers; there are male-identifying writers; there are lots more queer writers, which I think is great. We need to make space in the genre for anybody who wants to write a happily-ever-after. But the thing about romance is that we *do* make space for it. And I think that’s another piece of it. We are at this front line of social and cultural change. We are the ones pushing boundaries about who deserves a happily-ever-after. We are the ones pushing the conversations in our books about things like inequity and highlighting disability and inclusivity. And so I do think the power of romance is this loudly thrumming heart just beneath the surface of everything, and it makes me super proud to be part of it. As a genre it is so powerful, and I don’t even care if people realise it because that doesn’t take away from it at all.’

Lauren says she was once invited to a book club, only for the members to grill her about writing romance. ‘I went over to this woman’s house and they had read our book, and they were *savage*. They were like, “Are you obsessed with sex? Why do you write this kind of stuff? Do you tell people *publicly* that you write romance?” For me, it just was like, “Okay, you guys have a lot to unpack in your own lives if this is so uncomfortable for you. Please don’t bring me into it.”’

‘Sometimes, even when people *do* like our books, they’ll feel like they have to explain it,’ Christina adds. ““Oh, it’s my palate cleanser between my serious books.” Or, “I don’t usually like romance, but this was so fun.” People are so obsessed worrying about what people think or if they approve of what they read or watch or listen to. If it gives you joy and you’re not hurting anyone, what are you apologising for? So we tell everybody, “There are no guilty pleasures.” We hate that phrase.’

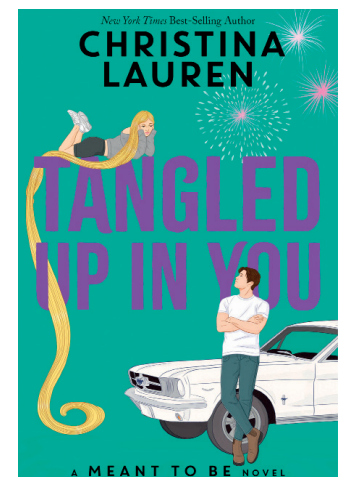
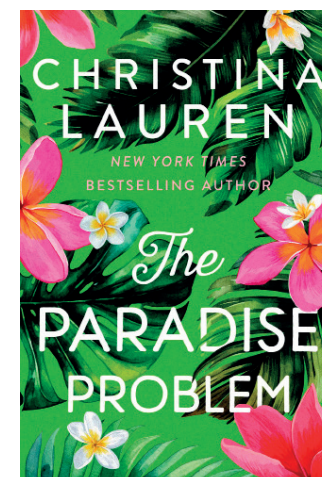
Any advice for other aspiring writers? ‘Yeah, we were recently in Germany at a book event and Christopher Paulini had the best quote,’ Lauren says. ‘He said, “If you give yourself permission to fail, you set yourself up for success.” Knowing that you might suck at the beginning lets you get the project going. Christina nods. ‘And he’s like, “You can write a bad chapter or even a bad book – that doesn’t make you a bad writer. It just means that you have room to get better.”’

‘Write the story that you can’t get out of your head, the one that you’re not seeing on the shelf, that you want to read,’ Lauren says.

And if you’re stuck midway? ‘The way that you finish the book is the way that you finish the book,’ Christina says. ‘There’s always someone doing it faster, or doing it better. You can’t focus on that. If you write your book 500 words at a time, that’s how you write your book. Your process is your process. And as long as you get to the end of it, you’ve done it.’

‘And remember that publishing careers have hills and valleys. You have to enjoy the hills and work through the valleys. The only thing you can control is your book.’

As for what they are currently working on, there may or may not be a genre shift in the works. ‘Right now, we’re each writing a Christina Lauren book in tandem, and then we’ll trade and edit,’ Lauren says. ‘We want to clear our calendar in 2024 so we can do some of the wilder ideas that we have – without expectations for whether it gets published or whatever happens with it. We have three books that we’re dying to write: we have a vampire book, a romantasy and a thriller, and the latter two have been bouncing around for years.’



The Paradise Problem, Christina Lauren’s latest novel, comes out in May 2024, and their Disney collaboration *Tangled Up in You* is due out in June 2024.

SAM BECKBESSINGER AND DALE HALVORSEN: SCARE TACTICS

Sam Beckbessinger and Dale Halvorsen



‘Both Dale and I have been writing fiction for a long time, just less commercially successfully basically,’ Sam says, laughing. ‘But I think for both of us this has kind of been a lifelong dream.’ The two have been friends for years, and have collaborated before, alongside their mutual friend Lauren Beukes, on a short story called *This Book Will Find You*. ‘I think what we learnt during that project is that Dale and I have incredibly complementary skills.’

Dale came up with the core idea that would later become *Girls of Little Hope*. ‘He asked if he could pick my brain about it and we started chatting. The idea started spiralling bigger and bigger, and it felt very natural to just continue working on it together. I think we’re both really glad that we did. I think it’s much cooler than anything either of us could have created in isolation. And it was also just so much more fun writing together than it was writing alone. It feels a bit like being in a band sometimes. You have a playmate to jam with. Both Dale and I have been working in TV as well for the last couple of years, and TV is an inherently collaborative medium. It feels strange to me that people don’t collaborate on books more often.’

‘I’ve always just wanted to be part of a duo or a trio of writers. That excites me, to be in a room bouncing ideas off each other,’ Dale says.

They started writing the book in 2018. During the first stages, they had ‘a big corkboard that looked a bit like a murder board’; later on, Sam started logging every detail on a spreadsheet. (‘I *do* love a spreadsheet. It was incredibly nerdy.’) ‘We would sit for hours

and chat through all of it. Dale has an incredible plot brain. And he is also really good at dialogue and banter. So I did the bulk of the prose writing, putting the words down on the page, and Dale would come in, and often we would role-play the conversations. A lot of the one-liners in the book are all out of Dale’s brilliant and ridiculous brain – and also all the auxiliary material, like the found objects: a zine, newspaper articles, all those kinds of things. All from 1996 – that in itself took a lot of research.’

In 2020, Sam moved to London – and two weeks later the Covid lockdown hit. ‘Writing the book together was a lifeline,’ she says. ‘It was one of the things that kept me going in the darkest, most lonely times of the pandemic. We’d just moved and I hadn’t met a single other person in the country.’

‘Writing this novel was basically a long-term game of make-believe, trying to freak each other out or make each other laugh. Most of it was written during lockdown, and it honestly kept us sane, spending long hours on Zoom having conversations about our imaginary friends (and which new horrible ordeal we could put them through). It’s so much easier to have a co-author when you’re writing a mystery, because you push each other to make more interesting choices: if you can surprise each other, you can probably surprise the reader. Dale did a lot of the planning work, figuring out exactly who was where at what time and carefully fixing plot holes, while I made his life difficult by bashing ahead creating new ones.’

Despite all their detailed planning the plot veered off in different directions every so often. ‘I think there’s a lot of stuff that happens while you’re actually



writing the book. Our friend Lauren uses this metaphor that I think about a lot, which is, “Writing feels a lot like driving a car through a dark road in the forest at night, and you can only see as far as the beams of your car’s lights.” So we had a destination in mind and we had a rough sense of the route. But as you’re writing, so much stuff emerges.’

‘For me, stories are driven by character,’ Dale says. ‘I like creating characters and then coming up with terrible moral quandaries for those characters. Then we put ourselves in the characters’ shoes and ask, “What would *we* do in that situation? What would *anyone* do in that situation?” The book is full of those moments of, “Is this right? Is this wrong?” and that propels the story. They don’t make the best decisions, but that’s one of the things that makes people people.’



If you can surprise each other, you can probably surprise the reader.



*I will also admit I do not write men well.
All the strong people in my life are women.*

Since they are both avid horror fans, the genre felt like a good fit. 'It's definitely one of the reasons we became friends – a lot of our friendship has evolved around watching horrors together. We both read horror since we were young – probably far *too* young to be reading Stephen King.' At one point, they even had a club dedicated to watching bad horror movies.

'We watched some real stinkers,' Sam says. 'I think my favourite was *I Bought a Vampire Motorcycle*. We also watched a short called *Bloodshed*, which was literally about a garden shed that murders people. It's perfection.'

'A lot of the good ones are written, directed and sometimes even starring just one person,' Dale says. 'I think you learn a lot from them, even if they fail spectacularly. You learn what *not* to do. And sometimes it's a really good idea, just terribly executed. And then obviously it's just funny.'

Introducing people to the genre is one of his favourite pastimes. 'A lot of really good directors got their start in horror, and there's a reason for that: it is the best playground to surprise or shock people. In horror there are a lot of tropes that you can twist, and you can march the reader or the viewer into unfamiliar territory. You can fuse genres together if you want to. But I think what really interested me is that you can write things that scare you. There's a quote that I like by Wes Craven: "The first monster you scare the audience with is yourself." That's just another way of saying, "Write what you know." But if it scares you, it's probably going to scare other people. That's what I love about horror: it's a lens through which to tell personal stories.'

Girls of Little Hope centres on three teenage girls – Kat, Donna

and Rae – and for that they dipped into their own experiences growing up. 'Collaborating on a novel is a constant dance between spending time in your own head and spending time together – specifically because so much of this book was dredging up our own memories of teenagehood,' Sam says. 'We had to spend time alone, thinking and working, and then come back together and kind of share and discuss what we'd been thinking about.'

'I think all of the characters have shards of us in them, but I think Rae probably ended up with more of Dale's back story and Kat ended up with the most of mine. And I think Donna felt like the person we wish we were as teenagers.'

Despite Margaret Atwood's advice – 'She says you shouldn't let people close to you read your work because it can be damaging,' Dale says – his mom was their first reader. 'I was extremely nervous, but she couldn't put it down and she had so many questions. I grew up as a Jehovah's Witness, and she said, "Why did you not use any of *that* stuff?" It was just too personal for me. Too close to home. But the whole religious struggle is very close to my story. That was hard for me, reckoning with parts of yourself that you don't really want to shine a light on.'

'I will also admit I do not write men well. All the strong people in my life are women. I have two sisters. My mother is my hero. My father was a ghost. Most of my male relationships have petered out, whereas my relationships with women have not. There are things I get wrong, but I feel that's where

my head goes first.'

Crafting the three girls also allowed them to indulge some of their 'nerdy obsessions'. 'That's why Kat has this amateur detective/ Nancy Drew part to her personality,' Dale says. 'That comes from both of us. And I always wanted to be a musician like Donna. Sometimes it's wish fulfilment; sometimes it's based on personal experience.'

While some of the plot points were discussed at length, they rarely argued. 'There were definitely things that we talked about a lot and it took us a while to get through, but it never felt oppositional,' Sam says. 'Both of us wanted to serve the story. The one thing we *did* struggle with was the ending. Up until almost the last draft of the book, we actually had two alternative endings written, and we sent the beta readers two versions. We didn't know which one was right; we could make arguments for either of them. The ending was one of the last things we decided on.'

So what's next for the duo? 'Right now we are working on some solo projects: I am working on a Jekyll and Hyde story about middle-age rage, and Dale is finishing a screenplay. And there's a TV show that we're working on together. But I definitely think we'd like to collaborate again some day. There are some ideas we have thrown around, but nothing in the works.'

So what is the TV show about? 'I can't tell you,' Sam says, laughing. 'I can tell you that Lauren is also involved, and that we used our short story as a springboard. But other than that we are sworn to secrecy and NDAed up to the eyeballs.' ♦