



ROCK OF AGES

Lily Brett's latest novel is suffused with the hauntings of the Holocaust juxtaposed with the die-young rock stars of the 60s. **Susan Hewitt** reports.

Looking back on the 60s and the stream of famous rock stars she met, Lily Brett is somewhat bemused by her fascination with their mothers. "I don't think 'Wow,'" she says of meeting Mick Jagger, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin or Jim Morrison.

"If anything, I nearly always asked them how they got on with their mother; that must have been a pretty important thing to me."

Brett is in Australia promoting her new book, *Lola Bensky*, which tells the story of a young Australian rock journalist in London, New York and Monterey in the 1960s. We follow her into marriage in her 20s, then a second marriage to a painter, children and a new life moving from Melbourne to New York.

Bensky is the daughter of Auschwitz survivors, a fact which has a significant impact on her relationship with her parents. By her 60s, she is a successful author, living in New York, surrounded by her elderly father, husband, children and grandchildren.

It is a story full of creeping emotion — starting out light, not quite trivial, but certainly funny, with a teenager's perspective on an almost surreal world. As *Lola* moves through middle age and her priorities change, we are taken through a deeper and more soul-searching range of reflections and emotions.

And then there is Lily Brett, who started her career as a 19-year-old rock journalist. Working for an Australian magazine, she travelled the world interviewing young musicians on the cusp of fame. She married a painter and moved from Melbourne to New York where she still lives, surrounded by four generations of her family, including her 96-year-old father. Her parents both survived Auschwitz, something she has spent a lifetime contemplating.

Brett laughs at how many people

have read *Lola Bensky* and then asked her what all the rock stars were really like. It is certainly difficult to see where Lily ends and *Lola* begins.

"The rock stars are pretty interesting and most people are interested," Brett says. "I tried to tell a very personal story about them. It wasn't like journalism now, you didn't have a set amount of time and a list of only certain things you were allowed to talk about." Jimi Hendrix went from being virtually unknown in London when Brett met him, to being very famous in a dramatically short period of time. She had a cup of tea at Mick Jagger's flat and talked about the Holocaust. She talked to Mama Cass about diets and Janis Joplin about her mother. She never liked Jim Morrison.

"I had no journalism training, I was just trying to do my job well. The thing that I liked about it on reflection, and possibly at the time, was getting the job done. I saw it as a very serious thing.

"A lot of people ask me are all the characters in my book really from my life," she says. "Is the father character my real father? If they have any common thing with my life, it is that the characters are a father and daughter who love each other.

"Whether it is me or not, what I wanted to do, was to connect with someone and to be as truthful as I could. I think the sense of being truthful is what I wanted to get across."

Lola Bensky's mother had an enormous influence on her. After she dies, one of the most memorable passages of the novel describes the hole she leaves in her daughter's life.

Brett's mother is also gone. "I think about missing her every single day and feel miserable about her not being here," she says. "Not that I have a miserable life, I just wish I could have a few minutes with her."

The tragedy of *Bensky's* family is always present in Brett's novel; always

her mother reminds her: "You will never understand what people are capable of."

So too Brett's mother:


"The sense of anguish she had was palpable, you knew about it all the time, and later I knew about the catastrophic things that had happened to her."

There is little doubt much of *Lola Bensky* is memoir, but one of the beauties of the story, alongside the charmingly drawn characters, is that it is also a story of survival — ordinary people changed forever by extraordinary events and how they move forward from there.

"I can't imagine losing one person I love, I panic easily," Brett explains. "My mother was such an adored daughter from a big close family. Then she had nothing, nothing of them, nothing to remember them by."

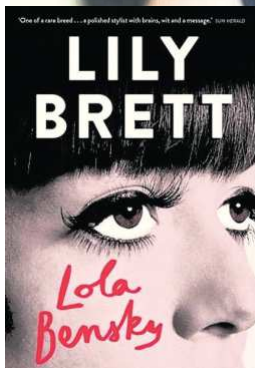
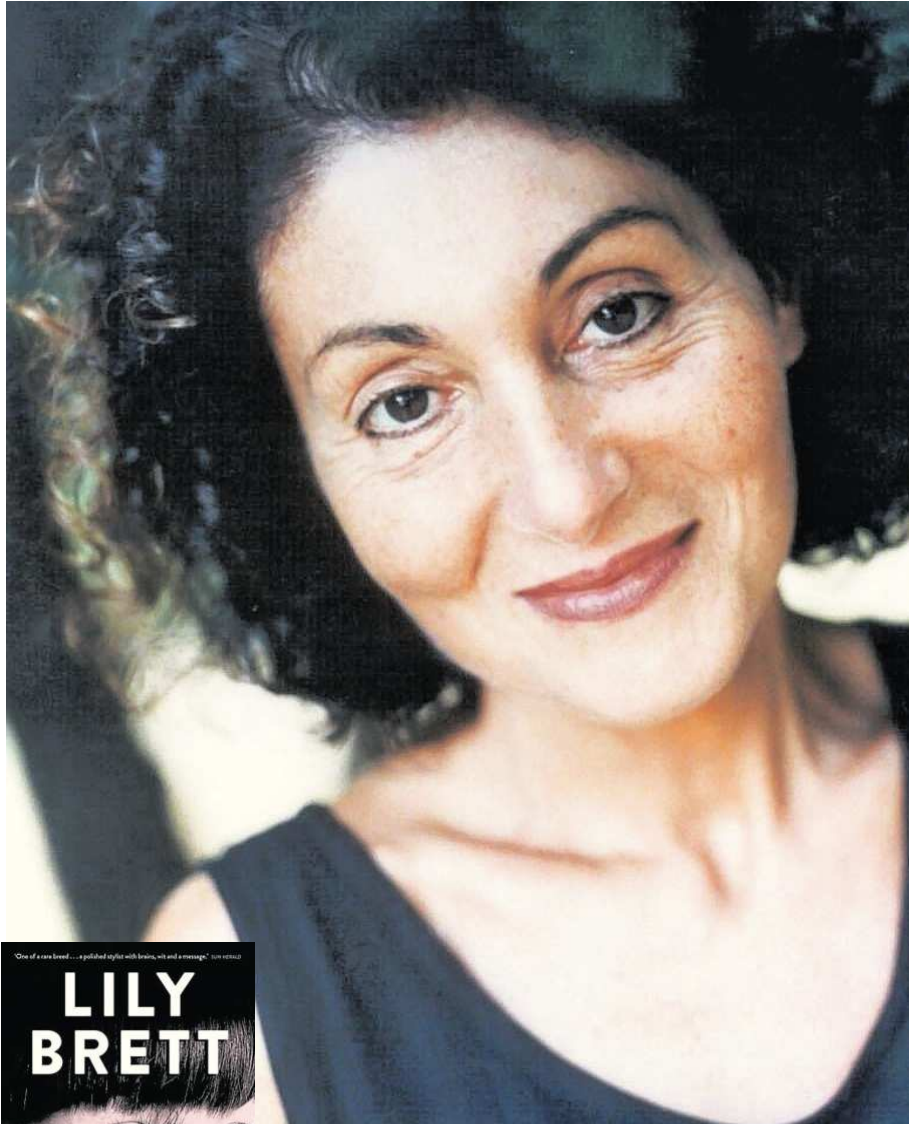
Like *Lola*, Brett says she grew up in the shattered remnants of a family with parents struggling to live, then found herself launched into a world full of young, talented people with apparently everything to live for, suddenly achieving every success they could have ever dreamed of.

"My parents wanted to live but they were struggling and then there were these rock stars hurtling towards their death." In the incredibly moving final pages of the book, *Lola* counts off the list of the dead and realises how important survival is and how glad she is that Mick Jagger is still alive.

"I also grew up with a mother who always said you will never, never know what people are capable of, so I set out to find out who these people really were, asking questions and trying to get to know them." 

Lola Bensky is published by Penguin (\$29.99).





HAUNTED Lily Brett's family survived the Holocaust.

“The sense of anguish she had was palpable, you knew about it all the time . . .”