



Rock and a hard place

Lily Brett has again mined dark corners of her past for her latest novel, but she has also tapped into a happier source.

TIM ELLIOTT

THERE'S a particularly instructive passage in Lily Brett's new book, *Lola Bensky*, in which the eponymous heroine catalogues all the phobias she wouldn't mind having. There's ablutophobia, the fear of washing, bathing or cleaning; astraphobia, the fear of thunder and lightning; the excellently ridiculous hylophobia, the fear of trees, forests or wood; pediophobia, the fear of dolls; and coulrophobia, the fear of clowns.

"Lola wasn't crazy about thunder or lightning or trees, forests, or woods, or even dolls," Brett writes. "And she could easily have lived without clowns." Instead, she has been saddled with agoraphobia, a truly crippling yet pedestrian pathology if ever there was one.

Here in her sixth novel, Brett, an Australian based in New York, has created in Lola a typically winning character: curious, self-conscious, naïve and neurotic, a wary Jewish girl locked in trench warfare with her waistline.

As the daughter of Auschwitz survivors, the 19-year-old Lola bears the weight of history on her increasingly ample shoulders, having absorbed, without even knowing it, their multiple sorrows and anxieties, their death-camp memories and apparently contagious hypochondria. "A twinge in an arm signified a stroke or heart attack. A mouth ulcer looked like oral cancer; a callus

on her foot metamorphosed into a tumour."

We first meet Lola in 1967 in London, where she is working as a correspondent for an Australian music magazine called *Rock-Out*. The *Rock-Out* job is a dream gig, allowing Lola to escape her native Melbourne for New York and London, where she interviews everyone from Mick Jagger to Cher, the Who, Cat Stevens, the Kinks, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. With her tape recorder and pancake make-up, Lola watches and listens and writes, compiling pen portraits of the stars, people who, she is intrigued to realise, are nothing like their popular images.

Lola is brave, too: she confronts her subjects as equals, surprising herself by candidly confiding details of her parents' Nazi-plagued past. Then, as she gets older and the Jimis and the Janises join the list of the dead, Lola's own morbid traumas — her parents' pain, her agoraphobia and panic attacks — begin bubbling to the surface.

Brett's career has been long and prolific — six novels, three essay collections and seven volumes of poetry. It's also been deeply autobiographical. Her best-known books, *Just Like That* (1994), *Too Many Men* (1999) and *You Gotta Have Balls* (2005), feature Jewish women, much like herself, who are living in the shadow of their Holocaust-survivor parents.

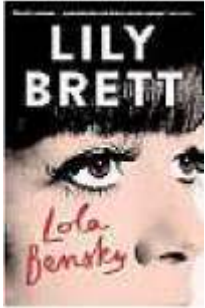
In *Lola Bensky*, Brett again borrows from her past, revisiting the days she spent as a rock journalist working overseas for Australia's first music magazine, called *Go-Set*. Save for the occasional tweak, Lola Bensky is as Lily Brett was, right down to the puppy fat and false eyelashes. The only question is why it took so long to write about her.

"So many people have asked me over the years, 'Why don't you talk much about your time as a rock journo? Why don't you write about it?'" Brett says, talking on the phone from Shelter Island, near New York, where she and her husband, painter and sculptor David Rankin, have a holiday home. "And so, eventually I thought OK, and I thought it would be fun, and started making lots of notes."

One day Brett gathered up all her notes and put them in a manila folder. "I then put an elastic band around it and put that folder in a large plastic bag, which I then put in a brown travel bag, and then I put that travel bag in a metal filing cabinet in my study, and I locked it. I would walk past it regularly and look at it. A year went by and then two years, and the publisher rang up and said, 'Um, we're not pressuring you, but ...'"

Brett had been gripped by fear, a Lola Bensky-like dread she didn't fully





Lily Brett makes use of semi-autobiography in *Lola Bensky*, drawing from her past in journalism and as a daughter of Holocaust survivors.

understand. "I didn't want to face that time in my life," Brett says. "Not the interviewing the rock stars part — that was fun — but who I was, how coated in my parents' past I was, and how recent that past was."

Eventually she decided she would either have to face the file or dump it. "The thought of dumping it made me feel sick, so I gave myself three months to write the book."

Retreating to Shelter Island, Brett arranged her papers, pencils and erasers — "all the accoutrements of writing that I love" — and started to write and write and write and write.

"I kept going for 11 months," she says. "I worked the longest hours I've ever worked on a book: I'd start at 9am,

then take 25 minutes for lunch, and finish most nights at 8pm. I was certain I had vitamin D deficiency, I hadn't been out for so long. But I didn't feel exhausted — I felt exhilarated. For those 11 months of writing, I was living in 1967. The fact it was 2011 passed me right by."

Brett's books bristle with memorable characters, such as Ruth Rothwax, the hand-wringing heroine of *Too Many Men*, and Edek, her indomitable father. In *Lola Bensky*, the father figure is again named Edek; the two Edeks even share the same idiosyncratic approach to the English language. But in *Lola Bensky* Brett adds a procession of household names: Jim Morrison, Jagger, Hendrix —

rock gods who are rendered as refreshingly three-dimensional.

"[Hendrix] was amazing in real life," Brett says. "I had seen him moments before I interviewed him — I was in the second row of his concert — and I had never seen a man move like that before in my life; I felt terrified, just the way he moved his lips and his tongue. I practically had to look away. And then I had to go into his dressing room, little Lily Brett from Melbourne, Australia. But then he was so polite, and talked to me in the most natural way."

As Brett's fans would know, however, the most constant character in her books is the Holocaust. Brett's father, Max, had been wealthy before the war, but lost everything when he was imprisoned at Auschwitz, along with his wife, Rose. Both of them lost their entire families. Brett and her parents moved into a terrace house in Brunswick, and then into a three-room cottage in Carlton; but everywhere they moved the dead came with them. "I lived in a house where the dead were more present than the living," Brett says.

Her mother, in particular, constantly

anguished over her dead relatives, especially her father. "All I knew was that all these people who were so important were dead, and that they died in a brutal way."

Stories from Auschwitz became part of Brett's hard-wiring: the Hygienic Institute in Block 10, where they injected internees with typhus and cholera and tried to glue women's wombs shut; the camp commandant who had prisoners toss babies into the air so he could shoot them with his pistol while his own daughter looked on, screaming with delight. These, too, are the stories Lola blurts out during her interviews, shards of a calamity that finally pop out like long-buried splinters.

"I once said to my mother, 'When I close my eyes I can hear crying', and she said, 'That's because when you were born everyone was crying, either out of joy at your birth or terrible anguish at loved ones who had died.'"

Max and Rose were happy to be alive and in Australia — "Dad would come home in between shifts at the factory he worked at, and say, 'This country is paradise'" — but their experiences

infused them with a suspicion of happiness that Brett inherited.

"Excess happiness expressed loudly is the most bothering aspect to me," she says. "You don't want to push your luck. I always feel bothered by people who, when asked how they are, say 'Excellent!' The man I live with, David, has a terrible tendency to say how wonderful everything is. I just grit my teeth. And if we are alone I say, 'Don't, just don't.'"

When she was young, in Melbourne, Brett used to envy the "carefreeness" of the English-speaking children she met at school. Now she is not so sure.

"The idea that a person's skin colour or sexuality or even the music they listen to makes them somehow less human than you, that's a dangerous idea that I've always tried to warn people about in my work," she says. "So in that way, my parents' history has compelled me to write. In an important way, it liberated me."

■ *Lola Bensusky* is published by Hamish Hamilton at \$29.99.

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