

This is the unedited version of a profile which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2000. The published version may have had minor changes.

The Profile: Nick Earls

CV Nick Earls, 37

2000: Won Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year (older readers) for 48 Shades of Brown

1996-2000: Published After January, Zigzag Street, Bachelor Kisses, Perfect Skin, Headgames

1994-98: Editor, Continuing Medical Education section, Medical Observer

1992-95: Part time senior medical officer, MBF

1988-92: GP

1987-88: Resident, Greenslopes Repatriation Hospital

1986: MB BS (honours), University of Queensland

THE BEST MEDICINE

Let's set the scene. Jon Marshall is a doctor struggling to come to terms with life after the death of his wife left him with a baby to rear and a guilty conscience. He has just had too much to drink, mainly because he doesn't know how to handle the fact that dinner at this woman's place is becoming uncomfortably intimate.

He escapes to her bathroom, accompanied by her cat, Flag. And now I'll hand you over to the person who is telling this story, Nick Earls.

“And that's when he jumps. Jumps for the urine stream and grabs at it with both paws, spraying it everywhere. This surprises him. He has no grasp of simple physics and obviously expected a different outcome.

“Worse, it makes me recoil backwards, changing the simple physics and directing the stream right at his head before I can stop it. He jumps away, shakes himself, manages to spread it around more. Tonight's dinner had not been going well. And now I've pissed on her cat.”

Earls, Brisbane writer and onetime GP, has been known to take the piss out of descriptions of his work as “laugh-out-loud” books. But it’s true - they do make it difficult to control a cackle, even for readers travelling on public transport.

Only the most earnest of cat lovers would not see the humour in the ultimately tragic fate of this poor cat, which featured in Earls’ most recent novel, *Perfect Skin*.

And because his books tend to reveal their characters in such excruciatingly painful detail - whether drunken, intimate encounters with jam jars or members of the opposite sex - it is tempting to assume that Earls is often writing from his own experiences.

This is particularly the case when a large cat with fierce eyes suddenly materialises on the back lawn of the writer’s Brisbane home. That’s Doug, says Earls.

We’ve just been joking about how his characters feel so real - he admits to being quite depressed after finishing *Perfect Skin* because he was missing one of its central characters, a baby nicknamed Bean - that it almost feels as if they are sitting at the table with us.

And so I wonder whether he ever had, uh, you know, that sort of close feline contact?

Well, actually, there was a cat. At a New Year’s Eve party. It lived in a household of women so was quite curious about the sight of a man standing over a loo. Earls didn’t baptise the cat but came close.

Partygoers recall that he was visibly shaken after emerging from the loo. But he was probably already wondering how this scene could be recycled into his work.

“I can’t get over that sometimes,” says Earls. “I can’t quite believe publishers in several countries are paying me good money for the cat weeing scene.”

In fact, they are paying Earls very good money for several books. Earls, who celebrates his 37th birthday this week (subs Oct 8), has achieved

great commercial success since publishing his first bestseller just five years ago.

Fortunately, he is far too kind to acknowledge the ignorance of my question: how come he has been able to give away medical work to concentrate on writing full time? I thought only the big guns, the Robert Drewe, could make a living out of writing?

Clare Forster, Earls' publisher at Penguin Books Australia, later puts me right. Earls has sold more than 100,000 books in Australia alone - not bad considering that an average print run for a good novel is 5-10,000 copies.

Earls himself estimates that all-up, including overseas sales, he has sold "somewhere in the hundreds of thousands by now".

"What Nick has done is to carve out a place for himself in popular fiction in a market that, with a few notable exceptions like Bryce Courtenay, is dominated by UK and US names," Forster says. "After Bryce Courtenay, Nick is one of our strongest selling Australian authors."

Fiona Inglis, Earls' agent at Curtis Brown, adds: "When people are asked about who are Australia's best known writers, they name the people like Rob Drewe, Kate Grenville, Tom Keneally - Nick would be selling as many books as them."

She suggests that Earls is not yet as well known because his audience is mainly younger. But his name is bound to hit the bright lights big time, with a film soon to be made of his first best seller, Zigzag Street, which for many readers evokes not just the trials of the broken hearted, but also a strong sense of Brisbane.

US interests are also considering Perfect Skin for a movie, and the book is also due to be published in the US next year, giving Earls his first big break into that huge market.

Earls' work is often described as comedy. He prefers to think of it as "intelligent commercial fiction", which can be read superficially for fun or at a deeper level. In thanking the Children's Book Council of Australia for his recent Book of the Year (older readers) award, for 48 Shades of

Brown, Earls acknowledged the ordinariness of his work, with its themes of awkwardness, vulnerability, and “interpersonal clumsiness”.

He described the book’s central character, Dan, as a “pretty regular suburban Australian teenager, dealing with regular issues. He's smart and funny and awkward and the disasters in his life are regular, survivable suburban disasters.”

Perhaps Earls is being serious when he says he decided early on to become a writer because he thought it would help attract girls - he is so quick with the witty lines, it’s sometimes hard to tell which ones are pure joking.

He wrote his first novel at 14. Unlike subsequent works, which tend to revolve around young men’s angst about girls, it was about freedom fighters in Yugoslavia. At the time, he was a student at Churchie, a well known private school in Brisbane.

Since arriving in Australia when he was eight, Earls had managed to lose his funny Northern Ireland accent. But he hadn’t quite managed to acquire the sporting prowess which spelt social success, and he was also academically bright - “at the nerdy end of the spectrum” as he puts it.

“It was not that I had some lofty dream of creating art,” he says. “It was that I had worked out that my offspin wasn’t going to get me anywhere, that I was never going to impress girls through sporting prowess, and that I sing flat, and I wasn’t going to have the dexterity to master a musical instrument. So I thought I’ve got to impress them with my writing. So I wrote some very, very unimpressive stuff.”

But that’s only part of the story. Earls grew up with a doctor-mother who spent many hours telling her two children stories, whether about her work in casualty departments or the witches who lived in a flat in the woods and went on colour-coded adventures.

“So when I started preschool and we were asked if we had any news, I always did and it was usually something that I made up,” remembers Earls. “In my preschool formula it was to do with a bird called Tommy and the stories each began when he was flushed down a toilet and emerged into a land of pooh and big orange diggers.

“It’s probably open to a whole range of interpretations but the one I prefer to go for is that I was just audience-aware and knew that I was dealing with a group of people who would love stories featuring pooh and big orange diggers.”

A whacky humour seems to run in the family. When I ring to interview Earls’ mother, his father answers. I must sound surprised when he asks if I like orienteering, because he then says not to worry, that “we’re an odd family”.

Despite his literary aspirations, Earls opted to study medicine because it was a “sensible and interesting choice” when he was 16 and “had just enough insight to know I was years away from turning writing into any sort of a job”.

He graduated from University of Queensland in 1986, then spent two years at Greenslopes Repatriation Hospital, and kept writing, “mainly bad poetry - because you can write bad poetry quite quickly”. He also began to get paid for writing - mainly jingles for advertising and corporate events.

He toyed with becoming a psychiatrist, but opted for general practice so that he could combine writing with part-time medical work. His first GP job was in a 24-hour medical centre at Taringa, which was inspired by Dr Geoffrey Edelsten’s decorating style. The decor was very pink.

“It was visually troubling, but a very nice place to work,” adds Earls.

“There are two good ways not to be liked as a resident. The first, which is both faster and easier, is to resent openly any call from a member of the nursing staff that is likely to lead to work. The second is to handle personal relationships with nursing staff injudiciously. The obvious trap (obvious, now, anyway) is that efforts to avoid the first error may be rewarded with opportunities to commit the second.”

So thinks the sometimes-annoying hero of Bachelor Kisses, a psychiatry resident called Jon Marshall, who seems incapable of resisting any obvious traps.

Of course, literature and medicine have had a longstanding relationship. Not only because many doctors have become famous authors, but because medicine provides such great fodder for stories.

In Earls' case, there are strong connections between his medical background and writing. In 1990, before he had even been published, he was invited to join a tour of celebrated authors, including Thea Astley and Tim Winton, travelling from Brisbane to Charleville by train.

He got a look in, ahead of all the other young wannabes, because he was a GP, he says. And it ended up being quite handy that there was a doctor on the train. The frozen peas also came in useful when one intoxicated author sprained an ankle.

“That was the first time I had met a novelist and I met a bunch of them,” says Earls. It helped give him the confidence to believe that someone from Brisbane, then a far less inspiring place than it is now, could be a successful writer.

Earls says his medical background has helped his writing, not just because it yields story ideas, but because it taught him useful skills in creative problem-solving. Also, general practice brought an insight into people and many aspects of life that he would not otherwise have had.

“People outside think it mystifying that you could go from medicine to writing,” he says, “but GPs get it.”

After his stint in general practice, Earls took up a part-time job with MBF, conducting in-depth assessments of cardiovascular disease risk factors. It made him start thinking about his own health. He changed his diet - reducing the reliance on Tim Tams which is a recurring theme in his writing - and also took up jogging.

“Far too many people were coming in the door, men ten years older than me and much larger than me and going, I used to look like you,” Earls remembers. “I thought, they can't all be lying. That's when I realised I needed to look after things a bit better.”

These days he finds jogging so easy that he has enough energy spare to use his running time imagining what his characters are saying to each other. So he actually hears them?

“Yeah, which sounds like a psychotic illness but I know they’re not real, so that’s the difference,” he smiles.

Angela Earls, who now works as a medical adviser to CentreLink, says she has learnt a lot about her son - and herself - from his writing. She learnt that a casual comment relayed from a lecture in adolescent medicine - that teenage boys who have their doors closed are probably masturbating - sent Nick into a spin. Other such incidents, which later cropped up in his work, also made her realise that he had been more insecure as an adolescent than she had realised at the time.

“All novelists put their life into their work,” Angela Earls says. “You use what you know, you use what you feel, and you use what you observe, and you put imagination on top of that.”

No matter how much or little of Nick Earls is found in his books, one thing is clear: he was right about writing attracting the girls, despite the blokey nature of many of his central characters.

“My archetypal reader is a late 20s, female uni graduate who may be in her second job and who is confident at work but finds relationships to be the usual series of low key nightmares that a lot of us do,” Earls says.

Indeed, Earls was given the unusual honour of being the solitary male invited to contribute to a recent British anthology of women’s short stories, “Girls’ Night In”. He is listed in the contents as Nick (ola) Earls.

His agent, publisher and film director - all women - are clearly big fans. We don’t know whether his wife of ten years was attracted by the writing because she prefers to keep a low profile. All we are allowed to know is that her name is Sarah but not Earls, she has a law degree, and works for the Queensland Government.

And she probably doesn’t like it when fans turn up at their home asking for autographs, as has happened, despite Earls’ frequent public appearances for book signing.

Liz Perkins, 26, is a policy officer with the WA Government who fell for Earls' writing in a big way. She has read Zigzag Street at least ten times. "I like reading about everyday characters and everyday people, just the fact that I can relate to them, they're incredibly amusing," she says.

Last year, just for the fun of it, Perkins put together a website on the author. When she visited Brisbane recently, Earls spent a day showing her all the places mentioned in his work, and she took photos for a "virtual tour" which will soon be displayed at <http://members.xoom.com/eliper/nick.html>.

"He's so enthusiastic about his books," Perkins says. "He will say, 'this is where such and such did such and such'. Because I'm so familiar with the books, it was like we were chatting about real people."

Earls clearly gets a buzz out of the feedback from readers around the world - including the law student who wrote to say that Zigzag Street had cheered her up hugely after being dumped in the middle of a depressing Swedish winter. When she met a new man, she made sure he was the right one by asking for his thoughts on the book. She just wanted to let Earls know that the new relationship was going really well.

"You hear that kind of thing once and it completely justifies spending the time writing a book," he says.

"Here I am in her house, and for the moment it's just the two of us on the third time we've met and she's smart and funny and certainly a babe and I'm feeling better than I've felt for a long time. And I can't find the catch. Is she a lesbian, and we're just going to be good friends and I've missed the signals?"

"Or maybe she thinks I'm something I'm not. Smarter, more interesting. Just because this all started when I knocked her out at medium range with another woman's shoe. And I think that's the most interesting thing I've done for years, and I can't live up to it, surely."

Thus ponders Richard Derriman, the protagonist of Zigzag Street, a corporate lawyer fumbling his way towards love.

Asked to describe himself, Earls says he is more considerate than he used to be, but not as funny as people expect him to be. "I don't even try," he says. "A novel allows you 18 months to work on a punch-line and life doesn't let you do that."

That's not quite the truth. Earls is very funny in the flesh. And also very intense, particularly when discussing his work.

He recently realised that only a kind of compulsion had kept him going, through all the years of manuscript rejection. When "Passion", a collection of short stories was published in 1992, it sold only 900 copies.

"When the odds are against you, the people who stick it out are the ones who aren't rational," he says.

These days, though, editors and publishers rave about Earls - and not just because his sales are now so impressive. Earls is very serious about his craft, is meticulous about meeting deadlines, and sticks to a firm schedule, wherein the year is carved into blocks of time for writing and for publicity.

Unlike many writers, he throws himself into the showbiz side of his work, including putting on energetic, one-man performances of his work in Australia and overseas. "It's kind of a cowardly version of standup comedy," he says.

Clare Forster says his willingness to perform and "go on the festival circuit and charm and entertain people" has helped Earls find his audience. "Whenever I see him performing I see him connecting with all the fans who come and say, you've written about my life," she says.

Earls was marginally disturbed when asked to do this interview. Not because of any reluctance to meet the press - he estimates he has done more than 500 interviews so far. But because it clashed with his schedule, which was that August and September should be devoted to writing his eighth book in the small shed at the bottom of his garden (which he rightly says looks more like an on-site real estate office than a creative's studio).

In the end, he was very generous with his time, losing hours to what he later called “a half-day manuscript-avoidance opportunity”.

Earls also plans his books carefully, sometimes taking years to develop an idea, and always working from a detailed outline.

Sitting on his back deck, overlooking Doug and the newly landscaped garden, he says: “The thing I’m writing now was a 26,000 word outline a week and a half ago. When it becomes a novel, it’s going to be three or four times that long. I work hard at making the end result look easy. Years ago I wanted too much to look clever. Now I’ve decided I want to actually be clever.”

The obvious conclusion from all this - the success, the discipline, the social confidence, the skill - is that Nick Earls is a lot more together than any of his protagonists. These days, at least.

“I managed to maintain an attachment to adolescence angst long after than was healthy for me by doing a very long degree,” he says. “I lived through a decade or more of what they go through in my books. And now that my life is fairly calm and settled and I know what I’m doing, it’s kind of easier to put myself back into these chaotic heads and invent something.”