

# fairytale ending

BENISON ANNE O'REILLY tells **gr** that she wasn't born to writing, but she's sure glad she found it.

As a new novelist, one of my favourite forms of entertainment is reading the stories of other writers: in books, magazines, the literary section of the newspaper, even on writers' own blogs. A common theme emerges – they have been 'writers' since birth. They first picked up a pen as a child or teenager. They have a bulging drawer of unpublished manuscripts from their youth.

I didn't. I don't. Yet, I now find myself, in my 40s, the author of two books. It's true that I have the genes on my side. My father's family is packed with writers, the most distinguished being Eleanor Dark (born Eleanor O'Reilly) who wrote a series of critically applauded novels in the 1930s and 40s.

It's also true I'm blessed (or cursed) with an overactive imagination. Like Ellie, the heroine of my novel **Happily Ever After?**, I've always been a daydreamer, but it's only recently I've thought to write my stories down.

When I left school in the 1980s I contemplated a career in journalism, but with Australia in mid-recession I chose the more conservative path of pharmacy, with a guaranteed job at the end. It probably wasn't the *right* choice, but my scientific training has left me with an enquiring mind, and that's got to be a good thing for a writer.

For years I worked at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney. Our noisy, underfunded, wonderfully dysfunctional public hospitals are where the stuff of life happens: births of our children, deaths of our parents, amazing stories of recovery, tragic stories of unexpected loss. One story stayed with me. While working in the heart and lung transplant unit I met a beautiful young woman, Fatima\*, who had developed a terminal lung disease during pregnancy, her only hope of survival a heart-lung transplant. She successfully gave birth to a little girl but soon she was back in hospital,

spending months waiting for a suitable donor. As her pharmacist I visited her every day, and we became friends. One weekend they found a donor and she had her transplant. But the transplanted lungs failed and she never made it off the ventilator. A little girl lost her mother, and I never got to say goodbye.

Eventually, seeking different fulfilment from my profession, I left St Vincent's behind. I studied marketing, got married and had a couple of kids. I found a job in a pharmaceutical company and moved from dispensing medicines to writing and talking about them.

After a time I had another baby, my third son. I took a job as a medical writer, producing educational materials for doctors. I wrote 100 000-word treatises on the treatment of heart failure and dementia, and learnt the art of serious scholarship. Somewhere along the way I also learnt to write. GPs are busy, I was told, and want facts, not scientific obfuscation. I discovered the beauty of the active verb.

Then, on a single day, everything changed. Funny how you don't see it coming.

On 27 February 2004, my youngest son, three-year-old Joe, was diagnosed with autism and my carefully constructed life plan lay in tatters. 'Why me?' I cried. But after a time it dawned on me: Why *not* me? If the story of Fatima and her small daughter had taught me anything it was that life is not always fair. I grieved a long time for my little 'lost' boy, resigned from my job, and for two years dedicated myself exclusively to his care.

When Joe went to school I did what people often do to reconcile the irreconcilable – I wrote a book, the *Australian Autism Handbook*. That little book, co-written with another autism mum, Seana Smith, has been embraced



by fellow parents and two years after publication is now in its second reprint.

It was while working on the *Autism Handbook* that my love affair with writing began. I discovered the satisfaction of a well-constructed sentence, the thrill of the perfect metaphor, the exquisite joy of finding just the right word. On a family holiday in Fiji the entire plot for a novel came to me in a single day. All I had to do was write it down, although that wasn't as easy as it sounds.

**Happily Ever After?** explores the themes of my own life. I have given Ellie different challenges but she has to learn the hard way that things don't always go to plan. Fortunately she retains her sense of humour, as does her creator. My son has autism, but he's not lost as I once feared. He's a happy, chatty kid and laughter has returned to our house. As Ellie philosophises, 'Isn't everyone's life equal parts comedy and tragedy?'

**Happily Ever After?** is testimony to the fact that many of us are born writers. Some of us just take a bit longer to discover it, I suppose. **gr**

**Happily Ever After?** by Benison Anne O'Reilly is published by Jane Curry Publishing, rrp \$32.99.

\*not her real name

