

Alice Jolly

Award-winning fiction writer Alice Jolly turns her hand to non-fiction in a moving account about the origins of her own family

BY CAROLINE SANDERSON

Ten years ago almost to the day that this author profile is published, writer Alice Jolly—already the mother of a three-year-old son Thomas—nearly died giving birth to a stillborn daughter, Laura, in a Brussels hospital. “The world of dead babies is a silent and shattered place,” she writes in her memoir, *Dead Babies and Seaside Towns*. A few days later, Jolly and her husband Stephen placed Laura’s coffin into a holdall and bore her tiny body back to England on Eurostar, to be buried at the foot of the Malvern Hills.

Think you’ve read enough memoirs about death to last a lifetime? Think again. For in common with the very best of them, *Dead Babies and Seaside Towns* is a book that bleeds life; a story laced with the kind of black, black humour by which our human tragedies are made bearable.

Jolly is an award-winning fiction writer who teaches on the Masters in Creative Writing course at Oxford University. She has published two novels with Simon & Schuster and is also an acclaimed playwright. In 2014 she was awarded the V S Pritchett Memorial Prize for her unpublished short story “Ray the Rottweiler”. But initially she had no desire to tell her own story. “I don’t trust memoirs, never have,” she affirms.

So what changed? “What happened was that events in my life became very strange and extreme, and like a sort of roadblock. I realised that if I didn’t write it all down, I might never write anything else again. And despite the fact that I wish I hadn’t lived through all this; to put it bluntly I’m a writer, and I know a good story when I see one.”

The events Jolly calls “strange and extreme” were as follows. After Laura’s death, Jolly suffered a series of



QUICK
CV

1966

Born in Hertfordshire

1986

Wins scholarship to read History at Worcester College, Oxford

2001

Publishes first novel, *What the Eye Doesn't See* (Simon & Schuster)

2008

Returns to England after 16 years living in Brussels. First play – “Love Match” – produced by the Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham

2014

Wins V S Pritchett Memorial Prize for the year’s best unpublished short story, “Ray the Rottweiler”

2015

Tutor on the Masters in Creative Writing course at Oxford University. Working on third novel

miscarriages which gave her a total of five dead babies in four years. Subsequent IVF treatment failed and left her traumatised. Investigations into the possibility of adoption were both negative and emotionally bruising. After moving back to the UK, Jolly tries to settle to her new life, prepared for it to deal her yet further blows. “Bring it on, you buggers. I’m ready,” she shouts at the single magpies which flap and hop “malevolently” in the lane close to her Gloucestershire house.

Then after a conversation with an American colleague, Jolly’s lawyer husband suggested surrogacy. Jolly’s initial reaction was: definitely not. “I thought the whole thing was morally a bit dodgy. But then I started reading a lot of accounts written by surrogate mothers and I spoke to people who were directly involved in surrogacy, and I began to change my mind.” After a great deal of soul-searching, Jolly and her husband decided to look for a surrogate in the US where—unlike in the UK—surrogacy agreements are enforceable in law. “I realised that there was a woman out there who really was prepared to have a baby for me. And I thought, well then why not? Why not do it?”

METICULOUS PLANNING

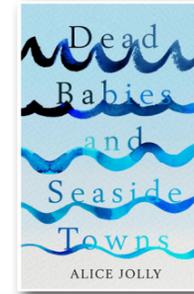
Following months of meticulous planning and expenditure and legal complexity and emails and long-distance conference calls, Amanda, a gestational surrogate in Minnesota was implanted with an embryo which resulted from an egg donated by a woman named Elena in North Dakota, and fertilised in California with sperm from Jolly’s husband. The resulting pregnancy was a healthy one. One memorable day, while on holiday in Cornwall, Jolly put her mobile phone to her ear, and heard from 4,000 miles away, the in-utero heartbeat of her daughter, by now given the indelible nickname of Hope.

Cut to October 2011, and with the birth due to be induced within days, Jolly, her husband and her son fly out to Minneapolis. In a diner in a small Midwest town, she meets for the first time the woman who is about to give birth to her husband’s child. “I don’t think I’m going to live through a stranger moment. It was terrifying. I sat there thinking: how do we know this isn’t a scam? But as soon as Amanda arrived, it was like we were old friends.”

Tell me about the moment you first saw Hope, I ask. “She was just this big life force. It was like she was born three months old and about to sit up.” After the silence of Laura’s stillbirth, the sound of Hope’s screaming, “storming rage” on entering the world was music to Jolly’s ears. “It was the sound of ‘I’m here, and I want to be looked after’. And I thought, yep, this one is definitely here to stay”.

Hope, now aged three and a half has always been told of her origins. “The advice we were given—the same advice as for adoptive parents—is that the child shouldn’t be able to remember a time when they didn’t know. She’s never going

METADATA



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to have the shock of somebody suddenly revealing it to her.”

Surrogacy seems to be a live issue at the moment. Meera Syal’s forthcoming novel, *The House of Hidden Mothers* centres on a woman who has a baby by a surrogate, and this autumn, model Candice Bourret is set to publish an autobiography in which she describes the role of surrogacy in her own quest to become a mother. But for years, it has been a shadowy and controversial subject. Jolly hopes that in sharing her experience, some of that controversy will be addressed. “I don’t really mind if people are in favour of surrogacy or not. The problem is that a lot of current debate is conducted at a very low level. My book is saying: let’s talk about what surrogacy really means, and how it actually works, instead of relying on a few garbled newspaper headlines.”

Dead Babies and Seaside Towns journeys through much else besides grief, stillbirth and surrogacy however. It’s also a book about what it means to be a family with all the technological and genetic possibilities the 21st century now affords. It’s a book about religious belief, identity, nature and nature, marriage, motherhood, female friendship and some truly remarkable women. And it’s a book about the kindness of strangers.

And what of the seaside towns? “I love books with a really strong sense of place, but my story happened in lots of different locations. So my love of seaside towns became a way to link bits of the book together.” For Jolly, rainy grey British seaside towns are also “the ultimate act of defiance” because they make you dream of good days, despite the reality.

CREATING A BUZZ

Dead Babies and Seaside Towns was always going to be a difficult proposition for a cautious publisher. Consequently Jolly decided to publish her memoir with Unbound which was enthusiastic, and supportive from the beginning. “Obviously with crowd funding, the difficult bit is getting the subscriptions in. But all you’re really doing is getting the work done earlier, rather than later. When you have a book coming out, you have to tell everyone you know anyway. I think I’ve been lucky to have been published by Unbound at this time, because there is quite a buzz about it now. It is a very clever model”. Jolly is donating her share of the proceeds to SANDS, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity.

A few days after our interview, I run into Alice and Hope on the train to Cheltenham. Hope is as excited a passenger as any three-year-old but the outing is a very everyday mother and daughter one. I think of the moment in her book where Jolly writes “I’m looking forward to normal”.

“Some people say ‘why does she think she’s got a right to a baby?’” Jolly muses. “I don’t think anybody thinks they’ve got a right to a baby. But they’re also not asking to win the lottery. All they are asking for is what most of us consider to be normal life”.

EXTRACT

“I see Laura often, running in a frost-glittered garden. She is two years old, a tiny flame-flicker of a child, just as her brother Thomas was at that age. She wears a navy blue beret and her silver-blond hair is cut bluntly and falls to just above her shoulders. Her blue wool coat is fitted at the waist and has a rounded velvet collar and large velvet-covered buttons. The frost has made her skin blue-white, her lips a smear of red, a wound that will not heal . . . Other children will grow up, change, disappoint, amaze, but not Laura. Even if I live to be one hundred, she will still be running—endlessly running—past the winter roses in her navy blue beret.”