

Bianca Zander, author of *The Girl Below*, Talks with Curtis Sittenfeld, *New York Times* bestselling author of *American Wife* and *Prep*

Curtis: There's so much I love about *The Girl Below*, and one of the things that really impressed me is how you alternate among three time periods—Suki's childhood in London, her early adulthood in New Zealand, and her return to London around age 30—and they're all completely gripping and vivid. How did you decide to structure your novel the way you did?

Bianca: The truth is that I structured it that way to prevent boring the pants off anyone. I started writing the novel with key events from Suki's childhood, but it quickly became apparent to me that writing from a child's perspective is very limiting—and by that I mean boring to read. However, I found that if I filtered those scenes through Suki's adult perspective—in effect had her adult self butting in—I killed them. Everything became less immediate, less gripping. The obvious solution was to dip into the childhood voice but not to stay there too long. The other factor is that as a first-time novelist, I needed a sturdy structure to cling to or I would have literally lost the plot, and alternating between three distinct time periods was it. A more experienced writer might have gone for a blended narrative but I really needed that scaffolding.

Curtis: You yourself have also lived in both London and New Zealand. Can you describe a little about how the two places have affected your writing and your identity?

Bianca: I grew up in London but my parents are from Australia and New Zealand. So even as a child, I had this sense of being born in a place but not really belonging there. My family was always a bit different, a bit un-English. Then, when I finally moved to New Zealand as a teenager, I was an alien there too. I was teased for my accent, for being a “pom”. Of course, the experience of being an outsider everywhere you go is what turns you into a writer, but you don't see that as a gift until later. At the time, you just want to fit in—and maybe you would fit in if you behaved less like a writer. (I'm not sure in the end that writers are born solely out of experience.) Nowadays, I consider myself to be a New Zealander, and in terms of my writing, this has been very freeing. I have taken creative risks that I'm not sure I would have taken if I lived in Britain, where the spirit of Martin Amis, or whoever, is always sneering over your shoulder. The sense there of either belonging to or being excluded from the literary canon is very heavy, almost paralyzing, but as a colonial upstart, I don't feel burdened by any of that.

Curtis: You've worked a lot as a journalist, as well as writing for film and television. How does writing a novel differ from other forms for you?

Bianca: Writing a novel is like a solo round-the-world yacht race. For at least some of the time, it's going to get hairy, and you better enjoy your own company or you won't make it home. Writing for film and television is the team

race equivalent, so a lot of the challenges are to do with getting along with other people and knowing when to fight for something and when to give in—skills that are not exactly essential to a novelist. But if you go into screenwriting knowing that it's a collaborative process, and that you will have to compromise, it can be an enjoyable ride. Journalism, on the other hand, is like stepping on to the boat, having a nosey in the sail locker, then hopping off again before it leaves port. It becomes very dissatisfying to only skim the surface of things, to be always at the mercy of deadlines and word count. Then again, I miss the breeziness of journalism. You could start a piece of writing and finish it within the hour—and it might even be good! A novel is something you live with for years—and the margin for failure is immense.

Curtis: Suki has some surreal experiences, and you seem to leave open to interpretation whether they're actually happening or her mind is just playing tricks on her. Do you have an opinion about which is correct, or do you want to let the reader decide?

Bianca: Can I have a buck each way? I think it's very important, when you head off into surreal or supernatural territory, to leave some interpretation open to the reader. The most unsatisfying ending to a novel like this would be, "But it was all a dream," because for me at least, there's nothing worse than feeling as though the writer has taken me for a ride. (I hate feeling tricked!) At the same time, *The Girl Below* is not sci-fi or fantasy, it's magical realism, and for the realism component to be credible, you can't completely abandon the laws of physics. To put it another way: some people believe in fairies while others don't. And as someone who is never quite sure, I didn't want the fairy people to feel conned—or for the skeptics to toss the book out a window on page seven.

Curtis: Even though there are some dark episodes in Suki's life, this is also a very funny book. Did you consciously inject humor or did it just arise organically?

Bianca: I'm so glad to hear that you think it's funny because one of the most disappointing things to me, when I started submitting the book, was that a lot of readers overlooked that aspect. They described the book as dark, haunting, compelling... but never as funny. And there I was thinking I had written this terribly witty book and that I would be hailed as the next Michael Chabon (Yes, even though I am not a dude). As to how this (obviously way too dry) humor made its way into the book in the first place, I never try too hard to be amusing in my writing because I think that in most cases, a situation or a line of dialogue is inherently funny or will never be funny. You can tease out this basic funniness or make it funnier than it was to start with but inserting an actual joke or a gag is in my opinion, icky.

Curtis: Five years ago, you said something to me that I've quoted (or perhaps paraphrased) to lots of other writers, which is that when one's

writing is going well, one doesn't need all the other vices and crutches we usually rely on to comfort and entertain ourselves. I think what you specifically said was, "When I'm writing, I don't even need to go shopping." On the other side of your first novel, do you still feel this way?

Bianca: I have no memory of saying that! But yes, now more than ever, I'm aware of how essential writing is to my overall sense of contentment. If I don't write regularly, or the writing is stalled, I start to feel empty and then grouchy, which sucks for everyone around me. These days, because I'm a mother, the tension for me is around finding that sweet spot between getting enough time to write so that I feel happy, and giving my three-year-old son enough devotion that he feels happy. As for shopping, I miss the days when daydreaming around the mall was actually an option. Now, my life is so busy that any shopping takes place in frenzied one-hour bursts—and that hour is always time stolen away from either my writing or my child. It's barely enjoyable, and I make a lot of bad purchases, but shopping is one crutch I could never completely give up.

Curtis: Here's where I get to brag a little: Even though we're about the same age, you're one of my former students. I taught you in a class at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand in 2007, and you and a bunch of your classmates still meet as a writing group (and my favorite part: you call yourselves the Sittenfelds!). Can you describe how the group works and how being in a writing group affected the completion or outcome of your novel?

Bianca: I've taken a bunch of writing classes in my time but this one gelled from the beginning, and I think after you (Curtis) went back to the States, we felt bereft. So we kept the group going, trying as much as possible to maintain the spirit of fun and generosity that you had instilled in us. We met once a month, started with a writing therapy session—which quickly devolved into 'anything' therapy—then got stuck into the serious business of snacking. Along the way, we discussed each other's work, though this part of the session was always more like cheerleading than critiquing. I think we all understood that criticism (and rejection letters) would come later, in the real world, but the main thing at that stage was to keep going—to finish the novels we had started. For years we kept this up, then a couple of us moved to a different city and the group limped on in fragmented form. When I think of the class now, it has a golden glow around it, and I can honestly say that without the Sittenfelds, I would not have finished those early drafts of *The Girl Below*. Writing my second novel, without that support, is kind of lame.