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The Octopus

Krissy Kneen has just published her third book, Triptych, a trio of entwined, pornographic novellas. Imogen Smith spoke to Krissy on the eve of her book launch, and found out about sex with dolphins, blogging, and persistence.

Sitting talking to Krissy Kneen in a crowded café in West End feels pretty risqué. For one thing, the tables are about three inches apart, and Krissy is describing, with some straightforward hand gestures and lots of enthusiasm, the mechanics of dolphin to human sex. Difficult, apparently, but not impossible.

I ask her about the octopus. *Is that possible?*

‘If you can think of it,’ she says, ‘it’s been done.’

‘Oh,’ I say. And yes, now I’m thinking of it, and all kinds of other things.

If you’re a writer you’ll know what a special thing it is to find your niche. To find that subject that turns you on so much that you can spend years and years talking about it. And for writers looking to get published, it’s great to develop a brand, foster your expertise, and build a readership around a topic or style that you’ve made your own.

As fascinating as it is for me – and for the girls on the table to our right; and the waitress; and the guy pretending to play with his phone on our left; and the people queuing for coffee – for Krissy Kneen, realising that her niche was sex: graphic, perverse, dark sex, didn’t necessarily open doors, and her throughout her career – over 20 years of it – she’s had to adapt and persist to get her writing accepted.

‘The thing that keeps me interested in writing,’ says Krissy, ‘is to challenge my own preconceptions, but that doesn’t necessarily make it easy to get published.’

Krissy found her calling pretty early on. She was first published at 14 in *The Australian Horror and Fantasy Magazine*. She then went on to become a finalist in the biggest sci-fi writing competition in the world, run by Elron Hubbard no less: Writers of the Future. Krissy says that at the time she was too young and naïve to capitalise on the opportunity: ‘I didn’t know what a big deal it was,’ she says. Young Krissy went on to write a novel, but, not knowing what to do with it, she let it languish in the bottom drawer, and when it came to working out what to study after she finished school, Krissy chose drama, thinking that becoming a playwright might be the best way to make a career out of writing: ‘I didn’t know you could write for a living and I didn’t want to be a journalist,’ says Krissy.

Not long after, one of her plays was performed at the Boîte in Brisbane, Krissy moved into film-making, and worked on SBS and ABC documentaries. ‘I could have gone down that path, but knew I wanted to write novels,’ she says.

So Krissy got to work and threw herself into writing, ‘I made sure everything in my life was learning about being a writer and working as a writer,’ she says.

And yes, she wrote about sex.

‘I think it has something to do with starting out in the horror genre,’ she says. ‘I was always interested in stuff that pushed boundaries,’ she says, ‘and I always want to go further and further.’

Over the space of a few years, Krissy entered the Vogel Literary Award (for unpublished manuscripts by writers under the age of 35) twice. The second time she was longlisted. She did a mentorship with Judith Lukin-Amundsen through Queensland Writers Centre – ‘This was great for me, because it gave me support to keep going,’ says Krissy. She also had a manuscript make it to an acquisitions meeting at Random House, but get rejected, and did an

MA at QUT, which produced another manuscript. She then gained a grant and with that help she wrote a novel that was shortlisted for the Emerging Queensland Author Manuscript Award at the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. The next year she was shortlisted again with another manuscript, and the next year, shortlisted again.

After these three bridesmaid episodes and facing the fact that judges and publishers seemed unwilling to back her writing, Krissy was, understandably, frustrated.

I ask her if she ever considered giving up. 'You can't quit,' she says, 'if you quit you just have to start something else from the beginning.'

Instead, she took a look at how she approached her career, and decided to change tack.

'I thought, *this is a career, so I need to be smart*. There were two turning points for my career,' she says. 'One: I gave up waiting for a publisher to publish me.'

Krissy and her friend Chris Currie (QUT alumnus and author of *The Ottoman Motel* published by Text in 2011) set up Eatbooks (www.eatbooks.com), and self-published *Swallow the Sound*, a small, gift-sized collection of four short, erotic stories, with design, typesetting and printing all paid for on Krissy's credit card. And, 'It went off'.

Krissy used the knowledge she'd gained by working in the industry for several years to sell over 1,000 copies, an incredible number for a self-published book in such a small niche. She called up everyone in her networks, from journalists to booksellers and engaged some guerrilla marketing techniques, including leaving flyers in the bathrooms at the BAFTAs. She managed to sell some copies of *Swallow the Sound* into a bookshop in New York. Once she'd had a bit of success, she realised she could use the book, and, more importantly the proof of the readership she'd built with it, to approach publishers.

‘That was the second thing I did, I decided to play the game rather than fighting the system,’ says Krissy.

‘People really responded to the introduction to *Swallow the Sound*, which I’d written in my own voice. People wanted more of that sort of writing and so I decided to write memoir.

‘I had to find a way to make my writing more accessible so that publishers would be willing to take a chance on it,’ she says, ‘and it wasn’t working with fiction.’

For some reason, if the stories were her stories, they were less confronting and more accessible than if they were fiction. Although Krissy didn’t necessarily want to write memoir, she says – ‘if you do memoir right it can be as well-crafted and as beautiful as any novel.’

‘I just needed content, and that’s how the blog came about.’

When Chris Currie started his *Furious Horses* blog, posting one story a day for a year, Krissy counterstruck with her own, *Furious Vaginas*. The subtitle of Krissy’s blog is *A discipline by Krissy Kneen*.

‘I dared myself to write a section every day for the memoir,’ she says. ‘For six or seven months I wrote every day.’

But the blog was as much an exercise in finding and connecting with an audience as it was about writing every day. Establishing her audience herself meant that when Krissy approached publishers, she had proof of the viability of her work.

‘It was about a lot of things,’ she says. ‘I committed to writing every day, no matter what. I wanted to prove that there were readers out there who wanted to read about sex, and I wanted the discipline to write about myself.’

‘I set myself some rules. Each post had to be completely true, it had to be about sex, and because I just wanted to get words down and the stories out there, there was no editing, just writing.’

And Krissy did connect with readers. There were times when the blog got over 3000 visits a day, and Krissy used this evidence of a receptive market, as well as the success of *Swallow the Sound*, to approach publishers.

She chose two: UQP and Text, and sent them a package that demonstrated the viability of her work.

‘I sent them *Swallow the Sound*, a link to *Furious Vaginas*, sample blog posts, an outline of the story, the first chapter, and a marketing plan.

UQP didn’t reply, but Text got back to her within a week. The senior editor there, Mandy Brett, said she needed the book, so Krissy took three weeks off work, went away, arranged all her blog posts on index cards, and wrote. She finished her memoir, *Affection*, submitted, and it was passed around at Text. In another week she was contracted.

‘I spent 20 years trying to go down the traditional path and getting nowhere,’ says Krissy, ‘but when I found an alternative path that worked for me, everything happened very quickly.’

Affection was published to great critical acclaim, and Krissy has continued with the blog. One night, after quite a few drinks and a pretty bad day, Krissy wrote a post called *Bestial*, which drew a lot of attention.

‘*Triptych* owes its existence to that particular blog post, and a lot of alcohol,’ she says.

Like a lot of Krissy’s work, *Triptych* is an exercise in tempting the reader. This temptation seems pretty innocuous at first, ordinary Brisbane characters living in ordinary places and

with ordinary jobs. The reader is invited to follow them through their lives into darker places. In the first story, it's internet sex, the second, bestiality, and the third, incest.

To read Krissy Kneen is to yield, let her take your hand and lead you down some back alley and into a dark basement room. *Triptych*'s three-part structure is perfect for this gradual surrender. Each story takes you a little further, tangling you up in more and more complex knots of eroticism, taboo, temptation, and perversity. Before you know it you're reading about sex with a horse; before you realise it you're enjoying yourself. Krissy's writing is intensely graphic and intensely realistic, so that the reader doesn't even stop to ask 'is that even possible?' until the book's long put away. The physical and emotional significance of the sex, and the pure pleasure of it dominate the narrative, and overcome the perversity of it.

It's a win-win situation. In Krissy's words: 'I set out to write pornographic literature. I give the reader the eroticism. I give myself the perversity.'

But for Krissy, *Triptych* is also a compromise. Like Hunter S. Thompson's famous 'It never got weird enough for me' line, the work she's published so far is still not perverse enough for Krissy.

'I set out to write pornographic literature,' she says. 'But I've made *Triptych* palatable – the three novellas have sympathetic characters and happy endings, which my novels don't have..

'This is not a final point for my writing. It's not my ultimate goal. The material I want to write next is more visceral, more dark. Where *Triptych* is about people transgressing social boundaries, my next work is about people transgressing their own boundaries.'

Although there is a lot of sex – graphic, controversial sex – Krissy's work isn't about that. I ask her what she is writing about, once all the sex is taken away.

‘Ultimately my work is about relationships,’ she says. ‘I’m interested in how people in relationships connect or don’t connect, and often sex is about whether you’re connecting or not. Often when you’re connecting physically, you’re not connecting mentally, and vice versa.’

Triptych has already met with a lot of controversy and criticism, and there will be plenty more to come. In terms of censorship, sex really is the final frontier. *Triptych* hasn’t changed what I think is moral or ethical. It hasn’t changed my own sexual preferences or mores. I did feel uncomfortable at times, but this was because I was having a good time, and experiencing this tension has changed the kind of reader I am. Having read *Triptych*, I’m a reader more willing to experience something new on the page than I have ever been.

When I ask Krissy what’s next she tells me – ‘A children’s book. A palate cleanser. Something with no sex at all. But it will be pretty violent.’

Krissy has the next four books planned out.

‘In terms of having a career, I want people to see that I have a broad palette,’ she says. But to my mind, it’s also an exercise in familiarisation. She describes her next work to me and I’m fascinated. Each takes the reader one step further down that hidden alley of perversity. Each a shade darker and a stroke more confronting.

It took Krissy 20 years to find a publisher, and she still has a number of works, her best work, she says, waiting on her hard drive for a publisher willing to take a risk, or a readership that has accepted her, or the right time, and that time isn’t yet.

It’s the experimentation so vivid in Krissy’s work that’s also meant she’s succeeded in the business of writing. She’s had the bravery to go it alone and the tenacity to keep trying and keep planning. Where her fiction is concerned, she’s the perfect guide: capable, experienced,

fearless, and, most of all, tirelessly curious. Always willing to plunge into the darkness and discover something new. I'm keeping hold of Krissy's hand and seeing where she'll take me next.