

Lucy Christopher
discusses her debut novel

Stolen



Lucy Christopher discusses her debut novel, *Stolen*

Q: Where did you get the idea for the novel?

A: The idea came from the setting. I've been wanting to write about the Australian desert for about ten years now. It's an amazing landscape – huge yet delicate, terrifying yet restorative, dangerous yet spiritual. It's also a landscape that provokes extreme cultural reactions – it's been vilified as a "horrorscape" by the media (a place where backpackers get murdered or dingoes steal your baby) and it's also an extremely spiritual place for its indigenous inhabitants. I've always been fascinated by its extremes.

Q: But why choose such an extreme subject as kidnapping?

A: Everything I'd ever tried writing in the past, I'd meticulously planned and researched first. This time I wanted to write something that would thrill me as I wrote it. And the only way I could do that was to write about something I was scared of – kidnapping and psychological abuse. As I got to know the characters, the plotline changed – and that was enormously exciting, too.

Q: Is *Stolen* an important novel for young women to read?

A: Absolutely. What I hope I've done is write about an extreme version of a domineering, controlling relationship, and by doing so I'm inviting young women to think about what could happen to them. Certainly when you're younger and governed by all those amazing teenage hormones, it's easy, I think, to get into the wrong kind of relationship. It's easy to get led along by and infatuated with someone who might not necessarily be right for you or for your life path.

By writing *Stolen*, I set out to challenge young women to question their own relationships. What are the boundaries between love, control, and obsession? And how do we find it within ourselves to avoid or escape from the wrong kind of situation? This process of realizing that you are attracted to someone who is not good for you and then finding the strength to move on – it's something that I think is important for many young women to think about.

Q: But Ty isn't always an evil character – in fact, some readers fall in love with him more than they hate him.

A: Yes, some people do fall in love with him, and yet we hate what he's done, too. It's an ambiguous relationship we have with Ty.

Having feelings for the "wrong" person is very common, and yet having such feelings is not a crime. It's what you do with those feelings that really determines your true mettle. Gemma must draw upon a huge amount of personal strength and integrity to distance herself from the very troubled Ty.



Q: And what about you? Did you fall in love with Ty?

A: Sure did! In fact, in my first draft, Gemma actually saves Ty from going to prison simply because I couldn't bear the thought of it myself! So, yes, I guess I became a bit infatuated with him, too. When I rewrote the novel, I realized that Gemma was stronger than this and needed to do the right thing for herself. In order to rewrite the ending, I also had to go through a process of distancing myself from the character of Ty. I had to look at him as a whole – not just through rose-tinted or "Stockholm-syndromed" spectacles! I had to learn to love and accept him for the kind of person he is – warts and all – rather than be obsessed by him.

Q: *Stolen* explores the boundaries between love and obsession. Do you think it's really so easy to confuse the two?

A: I think it is easy for Ty to confuse the two, sure, because I don't think that he has ever had much experience of true love. When Ty develops feelings for Gemma, and then becomes obsessed with her, he equates these feelings to love simply because he doesn't know any better. How could he? But Gemma can distinguish the boundaries between love and obsession, as she shows when she makes the difficult choice she does at the end of the story.

Q: You mention the "stolen generation." Is the title *Stolen* intended to reference this?

A: I suppose you could read aspects of the story as a racial allegory. Being violently caught and removed from his homeland is Ty's greatest fear, and he has nightmares about it. Ty's connection to his land, and his fear of being caught by the authorities, could establish him as a character sympathetic to an indigenous perspective.

Stolen is a heavily weighted word in Australian culture: It's often associated with the half-caste and full-blood aboriginal children who were taken from their birth families under deliberate government policy from the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1970s. When Gemma states that "they kind of stole you, too," she is linking Ty's childhood experience of being stolen by government social services to her own experience of being stolen by Ty, and yet she is also, inadvertently, linking Ty's experience to the forcible removal of the stolen generation from their desert homelands.

Q: What led you to decide that the format of *Stolen* should be a letter?

A: I needed a form that could convey the intensity and intimacy of the characters' relationship. Somehow, a letter was the only option. Besides, a letter was also the perfect outlet for Gemma as she tried to work through her conflicted thoughts and feelings.

Q: How did you research *Stolen*?

A: In spite of the serious subject matter, this was great fun! My boyfriend and I rented a four-wheel drive in Broome, Western Australia and made our way to Alice Springs in Northern Territory, exploring as many of the arid landscapes along the way as we could, taking thousands of photographs of trees and sand, and driving one of our guides crazy by asking thousands of questions about geology. I extensively read books about the Outback, made contacts with doctors, lawyers, poison experts, snake handlers, entomologists, indigenous locals, and cameleers. I watched as many movies about the Australian desert as I could.



Q: What are you working on next?

A: I've returned to work on the novel I was writing before *Stolen* abducted my mind! It's quite different. It's about a thirteen-year-old girl who discovers a very strange swan in a wild, abandoned wetlands reserve. I'm having fun researching the landscape of wetlands right now and learning all the myths about swans. The story's called *Flyaway*.



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By Lucy Christopher

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