

## Emily Perkins: The benefit of distance

Emily Perkins spent 11 years in London, writing about her native New Zealand. She tells Katy Guest why now she is back there she can finally write about here

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### David Sandison

"I think the distance really helps.... After 10 years I feel I know London now. To be able to write about it from New Zealand is great because I'm really able to inhabit this imaginary London."

On a surprise summer day in Soho, Emily Perkins sits in her publisher's office watching a mass of off-duty Brits pinkening on a tiny square of grass outside and preparing herself to leg it across the sweaty capital to the BBC. Leaning out to close a window against the smog and raising her voice over a building site, she takes a deep breath of London air and sighs, "It's great to be back".

It seems a funny thing to miss – but as a New Zealander who has split her life between Christchurch and London, with a minor detour to New York, Perkins knows about the important relationship between distance and perspective.

The newspaper column that she wrote for the Independent on Sunday often reported how she had gratefully escaped the capital on trips to remote parts of the world – where she inevitably found herself longing for traffic jams, diesel and decent coffee. In the 11 years she lived in London she married, had three children and wrote two novels and a collection of short stories all about the young, single and feckless of New Zealand. It wasn't until three years ago, after moving back home to Auckland, that she properly started work on her first London novel.

Novel *About My Wife* (Bloomsbury, £12.99) is Perkins's first to tackle the very adult topics of marriage, pregnancy and the cost of shopping at Borough Market. "I always knew it would be set in London," she says. "It needed to be." The long wait was partly because it took her 10 years to feel confident putting her new home into print – but more because it was the first story to feel rooted here. "Some of the pressures on the characters in this novel are not there in New Zealand in the same way," she explains. "Tom and Ann are experiencing a kind of financial pressure and they're at a time in their marriage... that comes with its own reality. The social pressures and anxiety become paranoia, and that experience seemed to belong here."

Of course poverty, anxiety and paranoia are no more unique to London than teenage pregnancy, working in McDonald's or the pained complaint that "Nothing's happening, nothing's happening, nothing's happening" (as a character cries in the collection, *Not Her Real Name*) are to small-town New Zealand. But something specifically London does saturate this novel. Ann is a runaway New Zealander, pushing 40 and pregnant for the first time, who loves her husband and friends but gives nothing away about her past. Tom is her adoring husband, dead set on reconstructing her word by word but somehow missing all the clues. They are happy, in love and excited about parenthood, but a sense of menace clouds their life together. There is a mugging, an unseen stalker, strange plagues of vermin and sinister smells. It becomes impossible to tell whether Ann is seeing things or Tom just can't see.

This is Perkins's first novel about pregnancy and parenthood, and it is written from the perspective of a man. It was another form of distance that she found liberating, she says. Tom



is English, modern, in touch with his feelings, but he lacks empathy. Her pregnancy, her growing physical distance from him metaphorically and literally, make her all the more difficult to understand or get close to. The consequences of this distance are catastrophic.

Perkins says that idea for this novel came at a dinner party when a fellow New Zealander joked that all Antipodeans living in Britain are hiding from something back home. (The theory was almost the reverse of her second novel, *Leave Before You Go*, in which Daniel, a Londoner, runs away to New Zealand to escape from the nothing of his life only to find that there's nothing in New Zealand, too.) It provided a perfect template for the character of Ann. But Perkins's arrival in London was nothing to do with running away.

Having starred as a teenager in a New Zealand TV soap opera, Perkins seemed set, like many of her early characters, for a career as an out-of-work actress. She studied at the New Zealand Drama School and put in the hours waiting tables (perfect training for a writer and observer of people, you would think). But it was when she realised she was spending more time not-acting than she was acting (and when she was asked to appear topless, for nothing, and told that she was the sixth choice for the role) that she knew it wasn't going to work out. She has no regrets. "Acting and drama training really helped," she believes. "I read a lot of play scripts and so dialogue came quite naturally, and the idea of character being expressed through that."

She had always been bookish – for her, that was part of the escapism. "You grow up reading literature from the other side of the world and it makes you realise that there's a bigger world out there. And if you are a certain sort of person, as I was, you want to go and see it. I was talking to people in Toronto who had the same experience." So, does a curriculum of English classics have the reverse effect on similar children growing up in London, or Dorset, or Haworth? "In the case of a character like Tom," she says, diplomatically.

It wasn't a great life change, then, when Perkins went on to study creative writing at the University of Wellington. She was taught by Bill Manhire, the award-winning poet and short story writer who is credited with almost single-handedly reviving New Zealand literature in the past decade. And it was here that she became ready to be a writer. "I think I was too young for drama school. They would tell us that we had to take risks, but I didn't really know what that meant. By the time I was 23 and was studying creative writing, I understood that."

Her first short story was published in a journal a year later, just before she set off to travel the world. Before she left New Zealand she was introduced to Peter Straus, then the publishing director of Picador, who encouraged her to write more. After visiting New York with her friend, the artist Karl Maughan, they ended up in London and she found a day job at another publisher, Bloomsbury (she would have just as soon worked behind a bar, she says, but this is the job that came up), so she stayed there and put together a collection of short stories on the quiet. "I came to England as I was travelling anyway and [Straus] introduced me to another editor here and they offered me a contract for my first book..." she says, as if this is how every young novelist gets her start. Not that it was as easy as it sounds. "I stalked [Peter Straus] with short stories," she laughs. Not *Her Real Name* won prizes in this country and in New Zealand.

In London she married Maughan, settled in a tiny rented house and started writing full time. Apart from the novels and the newspaper column, there were reviews, journalism and an aborted screen adaptation of someone else's book. "I'd love to be able to write for the theatre," she says, envying those writers who cross genres. The common hack's excuse, that writing for money all day is too creatively draining to leave room for writing the Great English Novel, doesn't wash with her. "It's about parcelling out time." It's something you learn to do when you have three children and a husband who paints for a living. "We're not exactly secure," she laughs. It's easy to see how she came up with the dilemma of Tom, a screenwriter who engages in a crucial betrayal in order to keep his family in pesto and borlotti beans.

With everything going so well in London, Perkins and family made another apparently off-the-cuff decision and moved back to New Zealand. They had taken some time out there to coalesce after her husband and eldest child were ill. (The horrible experience gave Perkins an

intriguing facet of the character of Ann, a sculptor who works at Bart's Hospital making precision moulds of the faces of sick people – she admits that she lifted the situation straight from life.) "It would have been much harder to sit here in London, in the middle of our lives, and say 'Let's do it, let's jump'" she says now. "But from there it seemed quite a natural decision."

She now works at the university in Auckland, teaching creative writing and working on another novel set in London. "I think the distance really helps," she says. "After 10 years I feel I know London now. To be able to write about it from New Zealand is great because I'm really able to inhabit this imaginary London." Outside the window, Soho still sweats. "It's very freeing," she says, "to have that detachment."

### **Biography** **Emily Perkins**

New Zealander Emily Perkins started writing professionally at 24, after giving up a career as an actor and studying creative writing with Bill Manhire at Victoria University, Wellington. After she moved to London and was working for the publisher Bloomsbury, her short story collection *Not Her Real Name* was published by Picador. It won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and was shortlisted for the John Lewellyn Rhys Prize. Picador also published her novels *Leave Before You Go* and *The New Girl*, but her latest book, *Novel About My Wife*, is published by Bloomsbury. Since 2004 she has lived in Auckland with her husband, painter Karl Maughan, and their children, and teaches creative writing at AUT. She presents *The Book Show* on TVNZ's TV One.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/emily-perkins-the-benefit-of-distance-828937.html>