

## **Sue, have you always wanted to be a writer?**

I always found – even as a child – that I experienced something special when I wrote, some kind of fulfilment that I didn’t get from anything else. It was as if my life became more dimensional. So, naturally, I was drawn to writing – and I was encouraged by my teachers to be a writer. However, I had no idea what the practical path to this was. I started out being an English teacher because I thought this was a way of being close to writing. Of course, I hadn’t factored in all the corrections, the disciplining and the regular yard duty sessions, as well as the fact that it wasn’t the easiest occupation for the shyest person in the world like I was at the time! After a few years, I heard about a writing course at RMIT – and I instantly enrolled. That was where I wrote my first novel.

**This is probably a related question, but what is it that inspires you to write? Is it dreams, your environment, half-heard conversations, or is it hearing the voice of the character you are going to write inside of you, insistent that you write what they have to say down?**



I think it begins with an emotion, some strong feeling that takes me away from the present reality. That feeling, whether it is one of sadness or joy or of complete devastation – whatever it might be – can be sparked by something simple. It might begin by hearing a piece of music or by seeing a bird return to its secret nest in the garden or perhaps by witnessing a single unguarded moment of someone I care deeply about.

**Sue, you’ve talked to me about your many influences when writing Alaska, but would you like to talk a little more about this for BTL readers? I was particularly interested by some of the books you mentioned to me: The Lover by Marguerite Duras, for instance, and works of philosophy too, like The Poetics of Space? (plus Ecopsychology?)**

‘The Lover’ is a book that affected me deeply. When I read it, I was completely mesmerised by the intense love affair at its centre and by the sheer beauty of its writing – its poetry, its spaces and movement between times. As I wrote ‘Alaska’ I remembered an article I’d read about Marguerite Duras. It had said that, while ‘The Lover’ was seemingly autobiographical, the man she wrote about in the novel was very different from and far more romantic than the one she’d known in real life. I wondered if she herself ever acknowledged that difference. It made me think how we, often unconsciously, make the people in our lives into what we desire them to be, adjust them in our minds so that they fit our own personal narratives and stories.

‘The Poetics of Space’ was also a very important book for me. It helped me see places – some as simple as a room in my own house – in an enchanted and special way. It certainly imbued the places of ‘Alaska’ – mia’s tiny downstairs room, ethan’s house in the snow, the forest – with a sense of significance and magic for me. ‘Ecopsychology’, which is a collection of essays on how we relate to our environment, was the book that helped me explore one of the strongest threads in ‘Alaska.’ It helped me see the importance of our connection with the natural world and how when this bond is broken, so too is our connection to our full spiritual and emotional lives. It also led me

to the works of Rachel Carson which I find are so evocative and passionate in their defence of nature.

**Lastly, I have to ask this. Was there any musical theatre element to the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards when you won the YA prize in 2009 for Something in the World called Love? (We were treated to this piece of artistry from Casey Bennetto last year when Kirsty Eagar's novel Raw Blue won: <http://wheelercentre.com/dailies/post/730f1bfb831c/> )**

No, we weren't that fortunate. We didn't have any musical theatre but it was a really special night, I remember. It felt to me like books and writing were being given their rightful celebrated and respected place – and I felt very honoured to be part of that.