

NSW:Lee Tulloch is a woman who has loitered in many lobbies

By Julia Carlisle

SYDNEY, AAP - Lee Tulloch often wonders what would have happened had she accepted the offer from the rich Italian stranger who approached her many years ago in the lobby of a Paris hotel.

The fact that she turned down his offer to accompany him to the island of Capri is one of the differences between her and the central character of her new book, *The Woman in the Lobby*.

But that's not to say there aren't plenty of similarities between the Melbourne-born writer and the fictitious Violet.

My rendezvous with Tulloch takes place in a five-star Sydney hotel, an ideal location to discuss her new novel.

Dressed in a knee-length black and white zebra print coat, she makes a striking entrance. Her long, straight, blond hair makes her easily recognisable.

Her walk is relaxed but confident, and her wide smiling face shows she feels at ease in these luxurious surroundings. She admits she's loitered in many hotels.

"I've sat in hundreds of lobbies," says Tulloch.

"When I was younger, and travelling, even if I didn't have a bed, I would dress up and go and sit in a hotel lobby and people would treat you nicely because you were well dressed.

"I learnt early on if you were well dressed and carried yourself in a gracious manner, people would respect you. I suppose because they think you have money.

"I used to enjoy stepping through a door into a lobby into another world.

"People, when they stay at hotels, take on another role. You can actually re-invent yourself in a hotel lobby.

"Hotel lobbies are mysterious and glamorous. In fact, I could live in a hotel," she laughs.

It's here that you find the similarity between the author and her character Violet, a beautiful Australian woman who works the lobbies of the world's most luxurious hotels.

Violet's story begins after a marriage breakdown when she ends up in bed with an international tennis star, then finds herself alone in Paris.

As she sips champagne in a bar at the stylish hotel, Violet is propositioned by a man to go to Vienna. She accepts, and her life changes.

She becomes a "travelling companion" to wealthy men, and soon grows accustomed to grand hotels, designer clothes and dazzling jewels, convincing herself that sex can be separated from love.

But she discovers there is heavy price to pay, and in so doing discovers something about herself.

"We can all kind of relate to Violet," says Tulloch.

"Although it's a very exotic world of wealthy people, I took a very ordinary Australian woman who comes from a middle class background, who's always been good, but because of a series of things that happen to her, ends up leading this life and being seduced by it.

"I wanted to take the steps that it would take to be in her situation."

Tulloch, too, has tasted a luxurious lifestyle - though unlike Violet she believes sex should go with love.

The former journalist and founding editor of *Harper's Bazaar Australia* has led a globetrotting life, having lived in Paris and New York for many years. Her journalist/writing career has taken her all round the world.

"Working in the fashion industry, on *Vogue* magazine, opened doors to a certain way of life, and let me observe this lifestyle," she says.

"Europeans have decadence, and don't have the emotional investment in the sexual issues that we (Australians) have.

"It interests me that you can separate love and sex.

"For some people, it's very much, 'this is what I want from life, which is money, and this is how I'm going to get it'.

"Whereas I'm very much caught up in the fact it has to be for love.

"I'm not condoning what Violet does, but I am condoning the risk she takes with herself. She can't find out who she is until she takes risks and throws herself into another environment, and it doesn't necessarily work."

Tulloch stresses that the book isn't about call girls and says she didn't intent to glamorise the lives of prostitutes or mistresses.

"I am not judgemental about women who are prostitutes or mistresses, but I don't see it as glamorous," she says.

"You might be a mistress, but if you make a career out of it, it is very empty."

The Woman in the Lobby is Tulloch's sixth book. Like her others, it explores "the psychology of sexuality".

It also explores how changed life circumstances can act as a catalyst for personal change. It's something Tulloch has experienced herself. She says being fired as the editor of Harpers Bazaar magazine in the 1980s changed her life.

"Yes, I shed some tears, because I was shocked.

"But I thought, okay, now I'm going to write a novel and decided to go overseas to do it. I sold my house and went to New York.

"It was a gamble, sometimes we had no money, but I was with my husband. And it has been a wonderful journey.

"Travelling makes you open and tolerant, and I'd encourage everyone to do it. Even if it's to the Australian outback. It's good to get out of your comfort zone."

Tulloch was living in New York with her photographer husband of 23 years and their daughter when the Twin Towers came down on September 11, 2001.

That event led them back to Sydney one month later.

Tulloch says the city now keeps her grounded and calm, though she has to escape regularly.

The small, cramped writing room in her rented house has million-dollar ocean views, but it also allows her to watch the planes fly in and out of Sydney.

"I look up and think, Oh there's the QF012 to New York, so I always have the sense of travelling," she says.

The Woman in the Lobby

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