



Sexual foyerism

Claire Sutherland selects a range of new releases



THINKING of the things she's done, places she's been to and people she's met, Melbourne-born writer Lee Tulloch wants to pinch herself.

Who wouldn't? Tulloch the journalist has observed the lives of movie stars, artists and style icons — even, recently, an Australian geisha — and lived in Paris and Manhattan before returning to Sydney after the trauma of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

"I interviewed Elizabeth Hurley in New York — she was lovely — but to get to the hotel there was this rigmarole about her secret code names, and stuff with minders. I've been exposed to that world without being in it," Tulloch, a former Australian *Vogue* editor, says.

"I don't feel I've been outside it. You pick up the insecurities of these people, their personalities, and that's a real privilege."

Experiences such as these have been recounted in magazine articles, but they have also been invaluable to Lee Tulloch the novelist, who has teased her source material into some surreal works of fiction. She's written about an Aussie surfer in New York, an arty city slicker's sea change gone murderously wrong and a supermodel who returns to haunt her personal assistant.

"All my books have been a bit heightened," she says.

"My first book, *Fabulous Nobodies*, was a satire, quite surrealistic, about a girl who talked to her clothes.

"When I wrote that, chick lit did not exist as a label. But a lot of chick-lit writers say it's their favourite book. Marian Keyes says that started her writing."

Tulloch, 54, says her latest novel, *The Woman in the Lobby*, which traces a middle-class Melbourne girl's evolution to globe-wandering courtesan, is also a book of the imagination.

Dumped by her husband in a Melbourne hotel, the beautiful Violet Armengard tries to make herself feel better by taking up with a visiting Ukrainian tennis star who's worth "a million dollars for every birthday".

He arranges for Violet to come to Paris, but when he doesn't turn up at their appointed meeting place, she accepts an offer from an Israeli diamond broker to accompany him to Vienna.

In time, she becomes an emotional shell of a woman, immune to sex and love but too seduced and changed by luxury to return to her former life.

Tulloch says though she put in a lot of time in hotel lobbies as research, the idea for the book sprang from a dinner in Paris in the early 1980s.

"I was in a restaurant with colleagues and at the next table was an elderly Italian man and two women," she says.

"At the end of the meal, one of the women came up to a woman at my table and asked if I would go with the man to Capri for the weekend. I didn't, of course, but when I was writing the book I would wonder, what if I had gone?"

She says characters in the book are not necessarily based on people she knows, but more on ideas and anecdotes she has heard.

"I've carried this idea around for years and years and years. I've known women who have met men, wealthy men, in hotel lobbies," Tulloch says.

She says there are rich women,



maybe divorced, who travel the world, picking up men.

Tulloch didn't want her book to glorify the exchange of sex for the trappings that Violet adores, nor the idea that it's an empowering choice.

"I was more interested in the psychological motivations."

She wanted to work out the steps a middle-class girl such as Violet — a girl like she herself had been, growing up in Kew — would take to become a modern-day courtesan.

Educated at Balwyn High School, Tulloch left Melbourne for Canberra as

a 22-year-old political researcher. But 18 months later, Sydney — and its glossy magazine world — offered a more attractive career option for a girl who had dreamed of being a costume designer or an actor.

"*Vogue* advertised for a fashion and beauty writer: I was hired after a trial, but quickly became arts and features editor," she says.

Tulloch is still a journalist. In January she went to Tokyo for the *Australian Women's Weekly* to report on an Aussie woman working as a geisha.

"The objective of the geisha is to get

a rich man to sponsor them. It's a status symbol for the man."

Also for the *Weekly*, she wrote about Australian model Kristy Hinze's love affair with vastly older US billionaire Jim Clarke.

Tulloch wrote the stories after *The Woman in the Lobby* and says Hinze's relationship was easy to see.

"Nevertheless, it confirmed to me that these things can happen. Beautiful young women meet these incredibly wealthy, powerful men. The relationship might last forever, or it might not."

Susan Bugg



HARD KEEPING SEX SCENES REAL

LEE Tulloch says she did not set out to write an erotic book. But when your central character is a woman whose personality, character and future are determined by her sexuality, there had to be sex in it — a lot of sex — and it had to be fairly explicit.

“Sex scenes are really tricky things to write,” Tulloch says.

For inspiration, she first turned to erotica such as *The Story of O*, the works of Anais Nin and *Venus in Furs* — whose author, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, gave masochism its name.

“Sometimes Anais Nin writes really well about it, and sometimes she writes really awful purple prose that’s completely over the top. On the other hand, a lot of women writers who write about sex, chick-litty stuff, it’s kind of crude and raunchy in a way I didn’t think was sexy.”

Tulloch says the secret to writing a successful sex scene is to be realistic; just put into words what the character is doing, then try to infuse the sex — when it’s “good” — with a sense of longing.

“That’s what’s missing from a lot of sex writing. If it’s romantic love, you really have to convey that.”

Tulloch found music to be more help than any of the famous writers about sex, and one musician in particular.

“Leonard Cohen, who I reckon is the best of all . . . the lyrics to his songs are fantastic and they’re really just how you feel in these situations. He writes good songs that make you think about what it would be like to have sex with someone.”

◀ **Looking in:** Lee Tulloch has been exposed to the world of the rich without living in it.

Picture: MANUELA CIFRA

***The Woman in the Lobby* by Lee Tulloch,**
Penguin, rrp. \$32.95, ISBN
9780670042951 is out now

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