



# THE ART OF LOSING

by Rebecca Connell

Twenty-two year old Louise's mother died tragically seventeen years ago. Convinced she knows who is responsible, she ventures to Oxford. Going undercover as a university student, Louise takes on her mother's name—Lydia—and follows Nicholas, a professor whom she blames for Lydia's death. While "Lydia" gets close to Nicholas's son, and then to his whole family, the professor remains ignorant to her true identity until a final, shocking confrontation.

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## FOR DISCUSSION

1. The story is told from two very different perspectives and by two very different characters. As a reader, did you instinctively relate to or trust one over the other? And if so, did that change over the course of the novel?
2. Throughout the novel we frequently encounter the idea of storytelling—Nicholas teaches literature, Louise listens to her father's bedtime stories and is encouraged by her mother to read and tell stories. But the truth behind all these stories remains hidden until the very end. To what extent do the stories we tell define our memories? Is it possible to look back on an event, a time or a place without being influenced by how it has been talked about or presented by others?

3. How do you interpret Lydia's death? Did you feel the cause of the crash was resolved by the end of the novel?

4. What do you think about Martin's decision to keep the reality of Louise's parentage a secret? Was more harm than good done? Is it possible to really know oneself if something so important has been deliberately obscured?

5. The reader only encounters Lydia through Louise and Nicholas's memories. Can we trust their depictions? As a reader did you sympathize with Lydia?

6. Do any of the novel's characters master the art of losing? In your experience, is this something that can be mastered?



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Connell graduated from Oxford University in 2001. *The Art of Losing* is her first novel. She lives in London.

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#### AN INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA CONNELL

**Q:** *The Art of Losing* is very much about identity, how someone's identity can be reshaped after their death or how taking on another person's identity awards certain freedoms. As a fiction writer, do you consider the process of writing a novel a chance to become someone else? Do your characters stay with you even after you've stopped writing for the day?

**A:** Writing definitely offers you the opportunity to explore thoughts and emotions that are not your own. We are all inevitably bound by our own preconceptions and opinions in the course of everyday life, and I do find a certain kind of release in throwing all of that aside and experimenting with seeing in a different way, through someone else's eyes. I think to an extent writers always pour something of themselves into their characters, but when set in the context of someone else's life, mindset and circumstances, these characteristics can become distorted to the extent of becoming almost unrecognizable.

I do find myself thinking about my characters all the time when I am in the middle of writing a novel. Sometimes I find it exhausting, because I find myself mulling over certain scenes and projecting myself into them, as if I am "acting out" that character. It's a sign that things are going well, though, so I welcome it.

**Q:** Did you write this novel in alternating chapters, as it appears in finished form? Or did you write one side of the story first before starting on the other?

**A:** I wrote the novel as it appears in its finished form, alternating between the perspectives of Louise and Nicholas. I always tend to write chronologically, in terms of a book's eventual structure – although in terms of the timeline, of course, it isn't chronological at all.

I think I found it easiest to think of each of the novel's perspectives as distinct, but interlinking and overlapping where necessary. I plotted out each section in advance, so that I had some idea of where I needed to be at the end of it, and how it would have to tie in with the other narrator's story, which I would then pick up. I am definitely a plotter; I can't imagine flying by the seat of my pants as a writer. The stories I write tend to hinge on past events, which I then have to build up to show their effect on the present, and that tends to demand quite a rigid structural approach.

**Q:** When the reader first encounters Nicholas, he is in the middle of a lecture, and at one point tells his students: "The concept of an emotional journey is one we haven't lost...But we've transfigured it into trite Hollywood movies, where a journey can be as simple as going from A to B with a ready-made message at the end of the rainbow." In writing this novel, or conceiving of the format of the book, did you set out to defy this type of formula?

**A:** You definitely couldn't accuse *The Art of Losing* of having a traditional happy ending! I suppose in a way, some of the inherent key themes of the novel – infidelity being the most obvious one – automatically defy the notion of emotional simplicity. I wanted to create a world where two characters, Nicholas and Lydia, fell in love, but where their circumstances made it very difficult for that love to resolve itself into anything positive. The potential for the happy ending was there: if Nicholas and Lydia had met when they were both single, they could quite well have ridden off into the sunset together.

However, I also wanted to suggest that a large part of the appeal they held for each other lay in the forbidden nature of their attraction. The "journey" they go on together is automatically complicated by this, and as a result it's impossible to know whether their attraction would have been as strong if they had met in simpler circumstances. Ultimately, in my eyes, love can't be reduced to a formula, because it is such a fluid concept. It changes with time, with circumstance. Ready-made emotional journeys ignore this complexity, and I wanted to write something truer to real life.

**Q:** Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art" opens with the line "The art of losing isn't hard to master." Does the novel's title refer to this poem? If so, did the poem serve as inspiration for the novel? Do you think losing is an art one can learn and perfect?

A: The novel's title does indeed come from the poem, which I stumbled across by chance. To be honest it was less a case of the poem itself directly inspiring the novel, and more a case of my finding some resonance in the phrase that I thought tied in very well with the themes that I was trying to explore.

In my eyes, Louise is a character who, due to her lack of self-confidence, has few discernible talents. The one instinctive knack she has is her ability to tap into the past, to emotionally empathise with this lost time and to reconnect with it. For her, this connection with the life she has lost is indeed an art, one that is very precious to her.

However, I think it's clear in the novel that this thing she holds most dear is actually making her unhappy. She needs to let go of her memories in order to move on to her future – it is her past that she ultimately has to lose. I do think there is value in knowing when to let go, and it's something that comes much more instinctively to some people than to others. If it is an art, I think that as with many arts, it is probably innate rather than learned.

Q: Have you ever gone incognito (or wanted to)?

A: I couldn't possibly answer that question! All I will say is that I think there is something very seductive in the idea of stepping out of your own identity. It frees you up to think and act in ways that you might normally consider alien, unwise or even unacceptable. We are all chameleons deep down, and sometimes we all have a need to break out of the boxes that others have put us in and try on a new persona for size...