



Open Book

Isolation, upheaval, grief: Alice Robinson mined dark moments for novel number three, and found that there is beauty in surrendering – especially in the sanctuary of the library.

PHOTO BY GANG OF BABES

by **Mek Yimam**

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Mek Yimam is a writer, editor and comic artist who lives and works on Dja Dja Wurrung Country.

Alice Robinson began writing her latest novel at a tumultuous time. In January 2020, after her marriage had ended, she moved from Gippsland to Melbourne's inner north with two children under seven. "In those years I was writing the book, I had to learn how to be alone and live alone. It was too gruelling to work at home and then confront a whole day of writing alone in the space as well," she says. And so every Saturday, for five years, in the time she had between parenting and working full-time, she sought sanctuary at the State Library or her local in North Fitzroy. "What I know is," she says, "if you keep doing that for a long time, a book comes out eventually."



The [process of writing the book] was probably as close to a spiritual practice as I would ever get.

Her book, *If You Go*, is a meditation on grief and motherhood. The narrator, Esther, emerged from Robinson's desire to write about the radical shifts in her own life by giving them over to a fictional character. "It was probably the darkest time of my life when I was writing this book. The [process] was probably as close to a spiritual practice as I would ever get," she says. Esther's story opens in a speculative future where she wakes in a bunker-style medical facility. As she pieces together a past that's more distant than she could imagine, her new reality offers limitless time to ruminate on all she's lost. In both the speculative "now" and the past, Esther exists in a state of suspended animation.

If You Go is Robinson's third novel following *The Glad Shout* (2019), which won the Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction, and *Anchor Point* (2015), her Stella Prize-longlisted debut. Each novel centres the mother-child relationship, albeit with changing perspectives. Reflecting on this thematic through-line, Robinson says, "Jonathan Franzen has this idea of 'hot material' that writers will keep returning to...this idea that you're going to keep telling the same story.

"I've always been interested in the domestic and

ideas around marriage and children and the home as a container for all of these things."

Her research into modernist architect Robin Boyd for her next book hints at a continuation of this interest. Boyd's visionary designs were concerned with the relationship between the home, environment and inhabitants.

Robinson initially approached *If You Go* as a domestic narrative; however, months into writing, she felt something was missing. Enter the speculative element and an idea she'd played with some 20 years earlier, of a character waking up from stasis. "I thought I could somehow bring these disparate things together and see what would happen," she says. The resulting impossibility of Esther's predicament intensifies the character's grief – and the story's tension.

The stasis Robinson set out to explore could just as easily be that which pervades early motherhood, family separation, bereavement or isolation during a pandemic – each, in its own way, precipitates a meeting with abstract notions of the self, time and existence. Exploring these ideas through Esther enabled Robinson to face her own grief. "I was frozen in the library for those years, like Esther was frozen. And I had to just sit with this thing that had happened to me and the aftermath of my feelings about it, and process them in some way by looking at Esther's grief with her."

In a flashback scene, Esther theorises that she and her extended family members are all trying to preserve "the impermeable", or stop time, in their lines of work – writing, painting, photography, music. Robinson recognises that she too attempts this with her writing and through social media. Her Facebook page, for instance, is home to years of family photos and snippets out of the mouths of her babes. Revisiting those moments can be complex.

"They come up and I think, *Oh my goodness, how charming or how funny*," she says. "The children are so beautiful, and our life looks so beautiful, but I know that I was often really exhausted, or short tempered, or feeling trapped."

For Robinson and her children, the conflation of lockdowns and family separation brought an unexpected gift. "Compared to their peers, for whom [the pandemic] came along as a big interrupter to normalcy, for my kids, everything was [already] thrown up in the air, and then they were put into this nurturing environment...so they came out of it in pretty good shape, one way or another," she says.

Her Saturday writing sessions left Robinson in good shape too. "The libraries were so important because you can be in public, even while you're doing your work. But by the end of the book, it was okay, I could stay home. There was some kind of reckoning with the existential aloneness." ■

IF YOU GO IS OUT NOW.