

## KATE HOLDEN

“I do have the kind of psychological profile that tends to be drawn to the taboo things - as an observer though, not as a participant - but in that case I thought I was going to be an observer, then it toppled over.” Australian author Kate Holden is explaining how she, a studious young woman from a stable background, who graduated from University with an Honours degree in Classic and Literature, became a heroin addict, then subsequently a sex worker.

“Your late teens and early twenties are full of things that you’ve never done before. I think I looked at it as a challenge, to take a step that truly terrified me” she elaborates. “It came from not understanding consequences, which I think is very typical of young people. I don’t recommend five years in heroin addiction as a maturing experience, but I don’t think it’s a bad thing to test yourself. It did teach me a lot of things that I needed to know about the world; I just think I did it rather dramatically.”

Holden’s first book, *In My Skin*, published in 2005, chronicled those years spent in an underworld of drugs, prostitution and ultimately profound solitude. It was a raw account, conveyed with little of the self-indulgence she fears plagues the memoir as a literary form, the “monstrous narcissism”, as she calls it. It hit a nerve. Since the book was published she has received messages from many addicts and ex-addicts who have sought her out to share their experiences or, uncomfortably for her, advice. Says Holden, “I find it incredibly humbling and moving, and I really appreciate the trust they put in me, but I am not trained in counseling. I sometimes think, ‘What am I doing here? I don’t even know what I’m talking about’.”

It’s been 10 years now since she finally weaned herself off the drugs that had replaced everything else in her life, and began emerging from the cocoon of her nocturnal existence. It started, intellectually, with a year of reading up on the French Revolution, which she found “allegorical” at the time (all the revolution coupled with carnage), and led her to the Romantic Poets. “I read Byron – I love Byron. I didn’t read the poetry so much as about their lives, I was fascinated with that.”

Holden instinctively responded to their credo: “The Romantics believed there was nothing so true about yourself as your emotions, your

response to the natural world. And I really needed to get back to that because I'd lived in this really strange world as a sex worker, where I was happy in lots of ways, but I lived a very artificial life, wearing costumes that weren't really my kind of clothes, and performing as this other personality, so I really needed to find authenticity. That was what I pursuing more than anything else."

Her new book, *The Romantic*, another memoir, recounts the nine months she spent living in Italy as she recovered from her former life. Holden felt the need to leave Melbourne in order to gain some perspective on what she had been through. "I think it was a good thing to do, to get away. Here I would have been constantly bucking against all the old things, so crossing to the other side of the world where absolutely no-one knew me, I could kind of reassemble everything." As the fug of addiction dissipated she experienced an awakening. "To suddenly have pain there, and joy, and pleasure and smell – it was like coming up from a subterranean world and moving into the daylight" she recalls.

Holden had planned to spend her time in Italy recuperating; in actual fact she ended up plunging headfirst into a series of liaisons, re-exploring her sexuality and newfound emotions with verve. She describes the book as being "about this girl who goes to Italy in search of the Romantic and then having this very picaresque journey through various types of romance and sex."

It comes as little surprise to learn that Holden, who wrote her graduating thesis on the diaries of Anais Nin, has been an avid journal keeper since the age of eight. For *The Romantic*, they were her starting point. "I went back to my diaries and found there were really comprehensive accounts of what was going on, which is more tragic in one way than anything else because I was so focused on these relationships at that time that I kept very, very detailed accounts of them – there were even verbatim passages of the conversations we had."

The result is another vivid chapter in Holden's already colourful life, bittersweet, illuminating, perhaps even a new feminist tome for another generation. Now, at 10 years clean, as a successful writer and columnist (for *The Age*, an Australian newspaper to which she contributes weekly), her years of tumult behind her, Holden exudes a kind intoxicating vivaciousness.

“I’m really happy with the writing; it’s such a joy, such a gratification. I try and explain to people that with heroin, it’s hard to go back to other types of satisfaction; it can be a bit nebulous. Heroin is a very concrete form of satisfaction. It’s difficult, when you’ve learnt that one, to see how you could be satisfied by anything else. I used to absolutely marvel at people who could get through the day without it. I had no idea how I was going to do it.”

That Holden not only got through the day without it, but has continued to for years now, is something she doesn’t take for granted. Nor is the opportunity to follow her vocation: “That’s one of the huge issues in recovery, that you have no faith that anything will ever comfort you in the same way. You can’t imagine anything ever taking that space. I think I’m incredibly lucky that I did find something that replaced that, and that I got a career and some success out of it.”

Interview Rebekah Davies