

# Interview with Brooke Davis

Annabel Owen

Brooke Davis is a 36 year old PhD graduate of Curtin University. Her debut novel, *Lost and Found*, which formed the creative component of her PhD, was published in 2014. It has been sold in 25 countries and is currently being translated into over 20 languages. Annabel Owen interviewed Brooke in late 2015 as part of our “Where Are They Now” investigation of past *Sitelines* authors. Brooke’s 2009 contribution of *Sitelines*, “The Bureaucracy of Death”, can be found

here: <http://sitelines.humanities.curtin.edu.au/editions/vol6no2/brookedavisthebureaucracyofdeath.cfm>

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*I shuffled in my seat in my study, and tested the camera. With my home bookshelf in the background, and the lighting just right, it wasn't a bad setting to conduct an interview. I watched my screen as “Brooke Davis is online” popped up on Skype. The clock flicked from 3.59 to 4.00pm and I clicked call.*

**AO: Let’s start off with something easy, did you always want to be a writer?**

BD: Yeah, I really did. Ever since I started reading and I realised that what I was reading was written by a human being, and that I was a human being, I decided.

*As a high school student, Brooke’s careers counsellor told her that ‘you can’t get a job as a writer’, and she needed to think of something else. She focused dually on the sciences and followed an interest in sport. However, the writing bug still got her, and on the day of her last Chemistry exam when she was 18, Brooke went home and wrote a story that was in her head and asked herself; what was she doing? Writing was obviously what she wanted to do.*

**AO: How did your PHD out of Curtin help with the success of your book?**

BD: It’s quite incredible really, because I did an undergrad in Creative and Professional Writing, and then did honours and then my PHD.

It's funny, because when I finished my undergraduate degree, no one knew who I was and no one would provide me with any money to help write a book, but when you do a PHD you can apply for a scholarship, which funds your writing. I couldn't believe someone was actually going to pay me to write a book.

And you get immediate peers and immediate mentors that are going to help you through that process. It's such an isolated experience. I just wouldn't have had the time and space to do it in my life, and if I didn't do it as part of a PHD I don't think I would've written it. I think it was very integral to the writing of that book for me.

**AO: Your piece on *Sitelines* 'The Bureaucracy of Death' is a Creative Non-Fiction piece published in Volume 6 No 2, 2009. How was having a publication on *Sitelines* significant to you, if at all?**

BD: That was huge for me. It was actually the first time I had anything published that was Creative Non-Fiction, and also about a really, really difficult subject for me to talk about. It was incredible really; it was quite liberating. I was just stunned that anyone thought it was worth putting up.

I think those tiny sparkles of validation within those degrees are really important.

**AO: What was it like becoming a published novelist after completing your PHD? What was that experience like?**

BD: It's hard to even put into language. It was what I had been working towards my whole life.

*A mere one month after completing her PHD, when Brooke was only 34 years old, the book had a publishing contract.*

It's not the narrative you're sold about how the publishing industry works. You are told, and I think rightly so, that you are going to have a lot of rejection.

*Brooke was on her own in a small bar in Canada when she got the news that the book was being published, with no one to share it with. She was hugging a drink alone, but by the end of the night everybody in the bar had bought her a drink to celebrate.*

**AO: How did you cope with that rapid level of attention and publicity?**

BD: I would wake up every day and have some kind of crazy news in my email inbox. There were times when I would just be in tears because I didn't know how to deal with it.

My friends had to deal with overwhelmed Brooke in the best way and the worst way. I don't know what I would have done without that support.

*Brooke is currently in Berlin promoting the book, and about to travel to France, Brussels, Germany and even Hungary to promote the book in different languages.*

Honestly it was full on for a long time, and it still kind of is, but I have reached a state of peace and a rhythm with it.

**AO: What have you learned from the experience?**

BD: I think the most important thing I have learned is that I just always need to be myself, in any of those situations. We have this celebrity culture now, you have to promote it and you have to perform all the time.

All I need to do is be genuine and true to myself.

*Brooke said she has barely done any writing since the book; all she has been doing is talking to people, which most of us don't realise is a big part of being a successful writer.*

**AO: I know you mentioned you haven't done a lot of writing, but how do you feel your writing has developed since the book, have you seen a change?**

BD: It is weird that you say that, because I've been thinking about that a lot at the moment.

I started writing around a second novel, and I think 'wow this is so different from my other book'. It's kind of terrifying. Now I have a readership, and expectations. If I don't write in the way I was writing, then people may be disappointed, and if I do, then other people may be disappointed. There's a new expectation on my writing that was never there before.

I'm trying to write and be genuine and write something that I care about.

I look at that book that I wrote so long ago really, and it feels like a time capsule.

**AO: Are there any tips you can give Curtin students?**

BD: It's funny when people ask for tips, because I feel like I am still learning.

When you're writing about things close to you, just read and write and read and write and read and write.

There's a beautiful quote by a guy called Ira Glass, the guy who does *This American Life*, and I'm going to paraphrase here, "When you are beginning writing, your taste in writing is really high and really incredible and your actual writing is not up to your taste. It's only through a sheer volume of writing that you begin to close that gap."

Another thing I keep close to me when I'm writing is a quote from Hemingway, and he actually does swear in it but he says "The first draft of anything is always shit." And I really love that because it gives you the freedom to just write.

And finally, a quote by Janet Burroway who says "Give yourself permission to fail" and I just love that quote because I think it's really important to learn to take risks, and to push yourself.

**AO: Where are you headed now? What are your future plans?**

BD: Physically, I am in Europe until the middle of November promoting the book. I have kind of just seen this year as saying yes to everything and writing when I can.

*Brooke's publishers fund most of her travelling, although she does pay for some of it when she has breaks and time to relax.*

When I get home I'm going to set up my life so really I can just get into my writing. I never thought that I would be able to say that 'next year I can actually focus on my writing'. I thought I would always be working six jobs and trying to write in between.

**AO: And lastly, what are you reading at present?**

BD: I love that question, because I'm also a bookseller. I am reading about six things.

I am reading Ali Smith, who won the Bailey's Women's prize for *How to Be Both*, and it is just a dream. I'm also reading Anna Funder's book *Stasiland*. And I am also reading a book by Kurt Vonnegut called *Timequake*, and I just love every single word that comes out of his mouth.

**AO: Thanks so much for taking the time for me to interview you today, Brooke.**

BD: Thank you for thinking of me.

*Brooke oozes personality, and expressed an interest in the books I read. She also asked me my plans for the evening, which just so happened to be a first date. She was really excited for me and it was inspiring and motivating to talk to somebody so successful, and see a down to earth, genuine person.*