

Keating regrets book

Singer Ronan Keating says he regrets writing his memoir a decade ago - because it was not interesting enough.

The former Boyzone star and Australian *X-Factor* judge said he should have waited until later in life rather than writing the 2001 autobiography when he was 24.

In an interview for the Smooth Radio Book Club he says: "Really that book was a little premature. I was a kid when I wrote that."

His admission comes as more and more young stars are persuaded to publish their stories after barely any time in the public spotlight.

Jessie J, who is also 24, has a book deal despite releasing her debut album only 18 months ago.

X Factor UK judge Tulisa Contostavlos, also 24, will release her memoir next month.

In contrast, Rolling Stones star Keith Richards was 66 when his acclaimed book was published, and Rod Stewart - whose autobiography comes out this year - is now 67.

Since Keating's book came out he's separated from wife Yvonne after 14 years of marriage, and his friend and bandmate Stephen Gately died.

Speculating on advice for his younger self about writing a book, he said: "I would have said don't - wait. I could write a hell of a book right now."



The effect of strangers

Strangers can give us the freedom to face our issues, writes KATE WALSH.

AS CHILDREN WE ARE TAUGHT THE perils of stranger-danger, but as adults a meeting with a stranger can be exactly what we need.

"Being with strangers can help you see things about yourself and face things about your past that you haven't faced before," says author Liz Byrski.

"There is a freedom that being with strangers gives us, because they don't see all our past baggage and we can forget about it."

Her latest novel, *In the Company of Strangers*, deals with exactly this - that strangers can give you the chance to open up without fear of judgment or repercussions. Byrski has often felt the strange freedom that comes with unknown surrounds.

"I first discovered that when I was married with young children, the first time I had gotten away on my own, for work, without having the responsibilities of children to worry about," she says.

"I thought it was amazing. Suddenly for two days I had a completely new life - I could be as good or as bad as I wanted."

In the Company of Strangers begins with the story of Ruby and Cat, two women who have been friends since they were sent to Australia as part of the child migration scheme. Ruby fled back to London early on and hasn't spoken properly to Cat in years when she receives news of her death and is told she is a co-beneficiary of Cat's lavender farm, Benson's Reach in Western Australia, along with Cat's nephew Declan.

Both are forced back to a property that holds painful and pleasant memories and need to learn to trust one another, as well as the other strangers that have come to Benson's Reach to escape the challenges of their own lives.

Writing about the child migration scheme between Britain and Australia is something Byrski has thought about doing since she was a journalist at the ABC in the '90s.

During her research, she was especially struck by the sense of shame victims of the project felt over something that wasn't their fault.

"A lot of people from that time felt incredible shame - they had shame ingrained in them by their homelessness and the treatment they received," she says.

"If you have any experience of shame in your life, whether it's big, small or massive like this, you don't want to go back, you don't



Liz Byrski, author of *In The Company of Strangers*.

want to open it up, you think it's best to forget about it, lock it away.

"But as long as you do that it's still there, determining how you are and who you are."

Like Byrski's six other novels, *In the Company of Strangers* explores what it means to be an older woman.

"All the messages you get about ageing are that it's going to be awful and terrible and boring when your children leave home, but for most women the truth is it's a very exciting time," laughs Byrski.

"Passing 50 and moving on from there is a chance to be different and do some of the things you haven't been able to do while putting other people's needs first."

Though there are many older women in this novel, Byrski includes a much younger male character, Todd, who experiences the same grief and sense of shame over his past the characters 50 years older than him do.

"None of us are confined to groups of friends and contacts that are one age," Byrski says.

"That character I never planned, I woke up one morning when I was writing the book and saw that boy walking through the raspberry plants and had to keep him in there, and he turned out to be quite valuable.

"It's something I've learnt from fiction, that anything I plan for characters usually goes awry. They seem to have a life of their own and you have to listen to what's happening and wait."

■ Byrski will speak at Kiama Library on Monday at 11am.

ALL TITLES TOP 10

- Fifty Shades of Grey**
EL James, Random House
- Fifty Shades Darker**
EL James, Random House
- Fifty Shades Freed**
EL James, Random House
- Kingdom of the Wicked: Skulduggery Pleasant**
Derek Landy, HarperCollins
- QF32**
Richard de Crespigny, PanMacmillan
- All That I Am**
Anna Funder, Penguin
- Bared to You**
Sylvia Day, Penguin Books
- Fallen Angel**
Daniel Silva, HarperCollins
- Say You're Sorry**
Michael Robotham, Little, Brown
- Watching the Dark**
Peter Robinson, Hodder
source: dymocks.com.au

In the Company of Strangers
Liz Byrski
Pan Macmillan, \$32.99

A SHORT HISTORY OF RUGBY LEAGUE IN AUSTRALIA
Will Evans
Slattery Media, \$39.95

Calling this book a "short history" is a little amusing because it clocks in at 747 pages - that's hardly short. Split into sections that include the history of the game, the finals, the clubs and the players, it's more of a book you pick up and dip into rather than read from front to back. There's plenty of fun to be had; as well as the serious side, Evans also delves into the offbeat, including lists of the most embarrassing on-field moments, one-game wonders, bogey teams, bizarre matches and controversies. A league fan will get loads of enjoyment out of this.

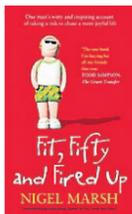
GLEN HUMPHRIES



FIT, FIFTY AND FIRED UP
Nigel Marsh
Allen Unwin, \$29.99

On the back of his bestseller *Fat, Forty and Fired*, Nigel Marsh has come up with the difficult follow-up. The reluctant advertising executive (and enthusiastic family man) admits that there's nothing special, or unusual, about his life. And therein lies both the strength and weakness of the book. He has an engaging style of writing and those of us "of a certain age" will identify with many of his insights and frustrations. However, not many of us could afford to take several years off work to learn cooking, and anyway, does the world really need someone else spruiking wisdom? As Steve Jobs said: "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life."

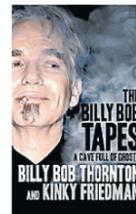
WILLIAM VERITY



THE BILLY BOB TAPES: A CAVE FULL OF GHOSTS
Billy Bob Thornton and Kinky Friedman
Virgin Books, \$32.95

Thornton is not your usual Hollywood star - "too ugly to be a leading man, and too handsome to be a character actor" he tells us - and this is not your usual tell-all Hollywood biography. The book is a series of late-night yarns that have been put on the page with a minimum of editing. In truth it's a mixed bag. His stories about growing up poor in Arkansas and his adventures as a struggling actor in LA are entertaining; his rants about what's wrong with the world (the internet, mostly) are less so. And there is a suspicion his tales would be funnier if you were hearing them over a bottle of Jack Daniel's on Billy Bob's back porch.

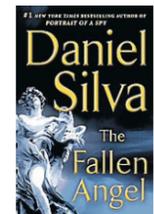
BENJAMIN LONG



THE FALLEN ANGEL
Daniel Silva
HarperCollins \$29.99

Former Israeli spy and art conservator Gabriel Allon has returned to the Vatican to restore a Caravaggio painting when a curator is found dead. Allon is asked by the Pope's private secretary to assist in the investigation, fearing a backlash against the Church. The Pope is scheduled to travel to Israel during the Easter celebrations and asks Allon to travel with him as his security guard. Against the advice of his beautiful wife, Allon agrees and arrives in Jerusalem, a sacred city for three of the world's religions, to face one of his most dangerous operations. Daniel Silva's well-written spy thrillers sustain the reader's interest to the last page.

JEAN FERGUSON



TOP PICK