



Drawing from a fascinating past

Author Rae Cairns reflected on her time in Northern Ireland to write *The Good Mother*. Pictures: Renee Nowyarger

Author Rae Cairns is one determined woman, dealing with Northern Irish paramilitary groups, a debilitating disease and an indifferent publishing industry on her journey into print, writes Greg Flynn

Somewhere between appearing as an 18-month-old model on a shampoo label and being sandwiched in the back seat of a car between the hard men of a Northern Irish paramilitary group, Lindfield author Rae Cairns managed to squeeze in performing in Young Talent Time shows, singing for actress Audrey Hepburn and working towards world peace.

Prompted by events during her time in Northern Ireland, Rae has written *The Good Mother*, a pacy novel centring on a Sydney mother forced to return to Belfast to testify at a murder trial where she has a choice: lie and let the killer walk free or tell the truth and endanger her children.

Rae's own experiences there included dating a man who hid the fact he was a paramilitary member while she was working as a volunteer taking children of rival loyalist and republican organisations on camps to meet and better understand each other.

Dealing with the Irish Republican Army and the Ulster Volunteer Force may have been daunting, but Rae then spent several laborious years trying to win over the jaded and tetchy members of another terrifying group: the Australian publishing industry.

On a recent weekday morning, her light-filled home – where the silence is occasionally broken by the soft thock, thock of ball on racquet coming from a neighbour's tennis court – seemed a long way from the rain-slicked streets of Northern Ireland's "bandit country".

There, in 1996, four "boofy guys" appeared on her doorstep, demanding she come and meet their leader. Although she won't name the paramilitary organisation that bundled her off in a car, she will say it was "pretty intimidating but they wanted me to believe in their cause".

"They thought I was favouring the other side. It was almost as if they were trying to put an arm around me and say: 'You're part of our community,'" she says.

"While I was working there, both sides pulled me up wanting to put their story forward because they believed I favoured the others."

"Tension was ever present. One day a loyalist sign went up at the end of her street declaring it would be "unwise" to befriend a republican.

Soon after, Rae was called to a Protestant meeting where she was told: "We were going to burn you out of the house but then we discovered you were baptised in the Anglican Church."

Rae, who was born in England and left for Australia three months later, still does not know how the would-be firebombers got the information.

Eventually, she did move houses after breaking up with her secretive boyfriend. Once again she won't name the paramilitary group involved, but she reveals he was "a good dancer". For Rae, it was a shock to discover after their "amazing summer" together that he may have been using their relationship to get information.

"The doubts and the questions stayed with me," she says.

After her children Amy



and Ben were born in Sydney, the thought "how far would I go to protect my children?" merged with "the idea of something coming back from your past". The result: *The Good Mother*.

Although writing the novel had its challenges, her background in the performing arts meant "the thing I found easiest was the dialogue". Her performance career began with the Young Talent Time troupe, followed by after-school programs at the Conservatorium of Music and international tours with a show which entertained audiences at the site of the

lowed their children to attend her camps for a simple reason: "It was basically free childcare."

Back in Australia, with school-age children of her own, she took the threat-from-the-past concept and

couldn't string a sentence together to speak, let alone write one. But a specialist found the solution and I was put on medication that worked for me. And so I came mostly right." With the new treatment



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spent eight months writing a manuscript. The feedback she received at a Sydney Writers' Festival workshop was: "You've nailed the story, now go away and work on the craft."

During a mentoring program with novelist Kathryn Heyman, the pair worked through the manuscript one 10,000-word chunk at a time.

With the redrafting phase over, Rae found a literary agent, who sent it to Australia's top five publishers.

Next? "Only the sound of crickets," according to Rae.

Another agent offered to represent Rae if she made further revisions. That rewrite done, the book was sent off again to publishers but, despite some "nibbles", nobody picked it up.

"And then I got diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis," says Rae. "They couldn't get my medications right. I was really ill. I was in and out of hospital. My hair fell out. It was just awful. Terrible. Because of all the medication, I

working, she turned back to the book. "I rang my agent and she said to me: 'Before you say anything, I've decided to close my agency.'"

Rae sent *The Good Mother* to a professional editor for a final review and then self-published it. By mid-2021, the novel was available in print and audio editions. In July, a friend contacted Rae and asked if she realised the book had been short-listed for the Australian Crime Writers Association's Ned Kelly Awards. Rae didn't but the publishing industry did.

Pre-Raphaelite hair swaying, the 52-year-old author becomes more elated as she reaches a pivotal chapter in her own story: "My email inbox was full of inquiries! Within two weeks I had signed with the Cameron's Management agency and I had a two-book contract with HarperCollins. I'm not on my own now."

The Good Mother, HarperCollins, \$32.99