

MOTHER OF ALL CHOICES

Past and present collide on and off the page in this explosive debut, writes Mercedes Maguire

The pages of *The Good Mother* read like a story beyond belief. And while debut Sydney author

Rae Cairns took a lot of literary licence with her first book, much of it was taken from her own experiences as a youth worker in Northern Ireland during the final years of *The Troubles* in the 1990s.

Cairns worked in Belfast for a year, taking children from the paramilitary families (Republican IRA and Protestant UVF) on camps. When she set out to write a novel, she based her protagonist, Sydney mum Sarah Calhoun, in part on these experiences.

"There is some of me in her," Cairns says of Calhoun.

"I would take kids from lower socio-economic paramilitary areas on camps together, getting them to meet for the first time. They were told by their parents they weren't allowed to talk to the other side but by the end of the week together they would be best mates. But then they'd have to go home and pretend they weren't.

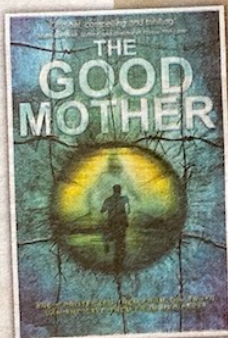
"I came across some interesting situations while I lived there, at various times I was pulled up by one side or the other because they thought I was favouring the other side or they felt I needed to be educated on their cause. I once had four boofy guys from a paramilitary organisation turn up at my door and ask me to accompany them to meet with the head of the organisation. They sat me in the back seat between two of them. It was scary but I knew they weren't going to hurt me, it was intimidation and a show of force."

The Good Mother explodes when Calhoun is forced to return to Belfast to testify in a murder case against an IRA boss.

This suburban soccer mum is faced with a tough choice – does she testify and finally help put this bad man behind bars, or does she buckle to threats against her family and provide him with an alibi?

The result of Cairns' five-year writing odyssey is a pacey, plot-driven thriller that stands up against some of the best in the genre.

It has been lauded in early reviews, enjoying an almost five-star rating on Goodreads



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and has been favourably spruiked by media personality Melissa Doyle.

As a debut author, Cairns took an unorthodox route to publication. She says she wrote her first draft in eight months, then reached out to writer and movie director Mark Lamprell who gave it to her straight. "You've nailed the story, now you need to learn how to write."

Taking the advice, Cairns embarked on a year-long mentorship with award-winning writer Kathryn Heyman who took Cairns through the book 10,000 words at a time, working on the copy and building the characters.

"It was like boot camp

for writing," Cairns recalls.

"After the year, I got an agent but then was unwell for a couple of years. I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and spent some time in hospital; I had a reaction to some medication and lost all my hair. It was a tough couple of years, I couldn't string a sentence together to speak it, let alone write it.

"Earlier this year, my agent closed her agency so it was back to the drawing board for me. But instead of finding another agent, I decided it was time to back myself, so I did."

Cairns released *The Good Mother* as an independent publication this month, hiring a professional cover designer and editor.

The whole time has been a valuable learning experience for Cairns and has given her the confidence to launch into her second novel.

Already 30,000 words, or a third of the way, into *The Empty Chair*, Cairns is again tackling the thriller genre, but this time her story is based in Australia. In what appears to be her trademark style, Cairns' novel opens with an explosive scene – a woman ringing her sister from the boot of a car.

"I read a news article about the impact of a missing person on a family, and the impact on those left behind intrigued me," she says.

"I don't think I will go back to the mentoring with Kathryn. But I'm in a very experienced writing group with (authors) Penelope Janu and Joanna Nell and I hope they will help me along and provide feedback.

"I'm open for *The Good Mother* to be picked up by a publisher and I'm also open to going down the traditional route with the next book. But there's been

a joy in having some level of involvement, like with the cover, for example, I really enjoyed that.

"I think a lot of the writing community in Australia is becoming hybrid now, even the traditional publishers are also putting out indie stuff."

FIND THE GOOD MOTHER ON AMAZON.COM.AU, SELECT BOOK STORES OR AT RAECAIRNS.COM

Sydney author Rae Cairns (above) drew on her own experiences working with the children of paramilitary families in Northern Ireland during *The Troubles* (below). Picture below: AP

