



Kiss & Tell

Australian author Jessica Stanley's razor-sharp, witty and unfailingly warm sophomore novel is charming readers both here and in her adopted home of London

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

After a breakup in 2009, Jessica Stanley took off on a trip abroad to take her mind off things, travelled to London to catch a play – Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia* – and met with her friend Jean, whom she’d connected with online. “[Jean] went back to her flat and told her neighbour, ‘I’ve just met the woman that you are going to marry,’” Stanley relays. “He thought so, too, for some reason.”

While dating long distance, Stanley and said neighbour met up in London, Melbourne and Japan. “And then,” she recalls of the beginnings of her relationship with her now-husband, “we were together.”

It’s a meet-cute fitting for the author of the novel labelled by UK newspaper *The Times* as “this summer’s rom-com must-read”. Opening in 2013, *Consider Yourself Kissed* follows Coralie, an Australian advertising copywriter in London, who meets Adam, a charming political journalist and single dad. Charting their relationship over the course of Coralie’s thirties, it’s a portrait of long-term love in all its light and shade and of a woman navigating parenthood and a career while balancing bedtimes, drop-offs and holiday camps and trying not to sacrifice her identity (and mental health) in the process. It was the May 2025 pick for Natalie Portman’s book club, while Liane Moriarty, author of *Big Little Lies*, said of the novel, “I didn’t want it to end”.

Coralie’s life loosely maps onto Stanley’s own biography: both moved to London aged 29 and worked in advertising and both are mothers who weathered parenting through the pandemic. Stanley is serene about having drawn from her lived experience for the novel. “I know from my friends and author interviews that women, especially, are supposed to be offended if someone says, ‘You’ve just written your life,’” offers Stanley. “They think it’s sexist as well as impugning them as an artist. But I don’t [think doing so] makes it any less of an artistic project. With this book, I wanted it to feel very real, to have a feeling of life over 10 years. Autobiographically, the details are not [exactly] the same [as my life], but all the emotions are real.”

Like Coralie, Stanley calls Hackney in East London home; she lives in the neighbourhood with her barrister husband, Jude, and their three children, aged 12, 10 and eight. She moved to London to be with Jude in January 2011. “It was so cold,” she remembers. “I was like, *Soon it will be spring*. And then, in May, I [thought], *This is a joke*.”

She was born in Sale in Victoria’s Gippsland region and went to high school in Canberra, followed by an arts degree at Australian National University, where she undertook an honours program in politics. Before she finished her honours, she was already working at *The Canberra Times*, explains Stanley, where she did a cadetship, ranging from the political beat to “getting a caption for a nice photo – and writing embarrassing features about mobile phones and being the

‘young person,’” she says. Her boyfriend at the time scored a job in Melbourne and Stanley moved there with him.

“I couldn’t get a journalism job in Melbourne,” she recalls. “So I thought I would do something funny, which was work on *Neighbours*.” She oversaw the international publicity for the show. “If a [television] magazine had a question for Dr. Karl, I would ask [him],” says Stanley. “It was just so fun.”

Next came a stint in the trade union movement, in the wake of then-Prime Minister John Howard’s divisive WorkChoices industrial relations reforms in 2005. “It was a mega change from how Australia had been,” explains Stanley. “I suddenly was like, *Wake up, you care about politics*.” Stanley worked at the Australian Council of Trade Unions as an online director, before moving into advertising copywriting.

“[Growing up], reading was my main thing and doing well at English was kind of the backbone of my personality,” she says. “But because, in my house, writers were so venerated, I just thought [writing] wasn’t something that I, a mortal person, could do. It was as if I [were to] say, ‘I want to be Princess Diana.’”

Aged 29, she began writing what eventually became her first novel, 2022’s *A Great Hope*, a family drama set in

Melbourne around the years of the governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard; it was nominated for the Mark & Evette Moran Nib Literary Award and the MUD Literary Prize.

“I just assumed that it would sell in the UK,” she notes of her debut. “But the feedback was, ‘Great book – [but it’s] too Australian’.

Instead of being devastated

and subdued, I was devastated and furious. A lot of that fury informed how I refused to de-Australianise *Consider Yourself Kissed*.” (Indeed, peppered throughout her second novel are references to everything from Paul Keating to Shapies biscuits, Helen Garner and the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum.)

Coralie’s decade-long personal narrative is punctuated by the drama of a particularly febrile time in British politics, spanning the lead-up to and fallout from Brexit and the UK’s subsequent revolving door of prime ministers.

“I was inspired by [Alan Hollinghurst’s 2004 Man Booker-winning novel] *The Line of Beauty*, [which is] set over three elections where Margaret Thatcher was elected,” explains Stanley. “The real Thatcher even comes into the book, [which] makes everything that’s happening to the main character even more real.

“It’s funny, because when I was writing [the book], I thought I was writing a searing ‘state of the nation’ novel, taking the temperature of the UK,” says Stanley. Which is why she’s amused that *Consider Yourself Kissed* has been widely received as a romance novel with comic elements.

“People who really write romcoms should be a bit annoyed at me, because I am not immersed in that community,” she laughs. “I haven’t done my time [or] read my 10,000 hours of romcom. It’s kind of stolen valour if I take the label.” **HB**

“I just assumed that it would sell in the UK. But the feedback was, ‘Great book – [but it’s] too Australian’. Instead of being devastated and subdued, I was devastated and furious”