



On the roller-coaster ride of motherhood

FELICITY McLEAN

Contrary to what celebrity yummy mummies tell us, motherhood is not all Bugaboos and babyccinos according to Sydney author Fiona Higgins. And she ought to know — she has three children aged under four.

Still, somehow she has found the time to write a novel, *The Mothers' Group*, which explores the everyday lives of a group of northern beaches' mums — frustrations, failures, heartbreak and all.

"I think there are a set of societal norms that are enforced around how women, particularly new mothers, should be thinking and feeling," Higgins says. "Namely, that the experience will be defined by boundless joy. And, while most new mothers do experience that, there are also other feelings that come with motherhood that society is less capable of accepting in a mother — feelings such as boredom or displacement or fear."

It's these challenges that Higgins wanted to address.

"Because of what I consider to be a lack of unsanitised stories around motherhood, I wanted to provide some kind of fiction (to fill that void)," she says.

"We're not comfortable looking at the shadow side of motherhood because at some level it's dangerous or we feel that somehow we failed if we say, 'Sometimes, parenting is really hard for me...'"

In fact, it was during a time when Higgins herself was finding parenting really hard that *The Mothers' Group* came about. Having previously written non-fiction (Higgins' first book was the memoir *Love In The Age Of Drought*), she turned to fiction as "writing therapy" during 18 difficult months of sleep-deprivation she went through with her second child.

"I've always found time to write but with this work it was different: it was at a difficult and challenging time that it all came to me."

Having written the book, Higgins had to explain its existence to her mothers' group.

"I announced I had been writing a book about a mothers' group — which could have been potentially awkward," Higgins says.

"But my mothers' group was

fantastic. Everyone was really excited — once they got over the initial shock!"

Yet despite her obvious real-life inspiration, Higgins is at pains to point out that her book is fiction. The characters are "definitely composites of people I know, or experiences I know people have had", but still they are very much invented, she explains.

This grounding in reality is what makes Higgins' characters so compelling. From workaholic Ginie to single-mother Suzie, from Balinese immigrant Made to postnatal depression sufferer Pippa, there will be a character in *The Mothers' Group* that is at least partly like you or someone you know.

"Not everybody experiences the specific issues in the novel," says Higgins of the book's themes such as infidelity, substance abuse and birth deformities.

"But everybody experiences some issues, don't they? I think you would have to be a pretty rare person to transition into motherhood without at least some challenge."

The Mothers' Group is out now, \$29.99, Allen & Unwin





Fiona Higgins's book challenges the notion that motherhood is all joy