



ONLINE AFFAIR CASTS A WIFE INTO DIFFICULT TERRAIN

Fiona Higgins is fascinated by the mysteries that lie beneath long-term relationships, writes **LINDA MORRIS**.

It's been a month since Fiona Higgins found herself unexpectedly in Sydney because of an intestinal parasite her son contracted in Bali. The infection was not life-threatening but it left seven-year-old Oliver gaunt and requiring treatment at Westmead Hospital.

"Bali is ... not a place to get sick," Higgins says. "We were stuck 2½ hours in a traffic jam trying to get him to a hospital."

Now that her eldest of three is making a full recovery, Higgins is able to promote her new book *Wife on the Run*, about a marriage gone sour from the demands of children and quiet domestic compromises.

The book opens with Paula McInnes' discovery her daughter has been trolled on Facebook. The next day her husband Hamish's online affair with a girl half his age is exposed. Paula quits her orderly life in suburban Melbourne and takes the kids and her father on a road trip across the Nullarbor.

Higgins has always been fascinated by what lies beneath the surface of intimate relationships.

"Nothing is ever whatever it seems," she says. "In *Wife on the Run* I chose to explore a marriage that has done some time ... to cover some of that difficult terrain around how you can maintain passion and respect in a long-term, monogamous relationship when there are all these pressures."

Sometimes staying and fighting for a relationship takes more strength of character than running away, Higgins says.

"I was interested in the question of change. Why does it take a disaster for us to change as humans and start prioritising the most important things in life? Why are we happy to stay in a state of stagnant inertia?"

It's not Higgins' story. Her marriage to former cotton farmer Stuart reads like a fairytale but she knows how the needs of a family can overwhelm a

parent. Oliver's sickness was only the latest in a series of family mishaps since moving two years

ago to the Indonesian island, where Stuart works in agricultural development. On her return there some Balinese friends suggested she seek a white witchdoctor to perform a cleansing ceremony on the Higgins' home among the rice fields.

About 18 months ago, someone broke into her home and performed a ritual of black magic. The burglar prayed and defecated at the property boundary, entered the property shoeless and, while the family slept, removed their shirts and nibbled on bread from the freezer to steal their good fortune.

"Black magic really creeps me out," says Higgins, but not enough to faze her. The experience may feature in her next book.

Higgins has always wanted to "give things a red-not go". In 1999 she rode a bicycle 16,455 kilometres around Australia to raise \$100,000 to better the lives of Indonesians caught in the Asian financial crisis. She left Sydney for remote rural Queensland and marriage with Higgins in 2005. Her jaunty emails to friends and family turned into the fish-out-of-water memoir *Love in the Age of Drought*. *The Mothers' Group* was written while she struggled with sleep deprivation after the birth of her second baby.

"After the first six months of thinking 'this will pass', and catching snatches of sleep when I could, it came to a point where I thought, 'I'll just put the baby down and stand at the laptop and just punch out whatever is occurring to me'."

The Mothers' Group, about six women coping with first-time motherhood, was warmly received,

and *Wife on the Run* mines the same territory of contemporary family life.

Hamish is a cad and Paula hardly saintly but the real bogeyman of *Wife on the Run* is social media. "Change is common across generations but I think the world has changed in such a radical way,"



Higgins says.

"It's like we are in the midst of this grand social experiment affecting the fabric of the world and we don't know to what end yet."



Stretched: Fiona Higgins fits writing in around family life. Photo: James Brickwood