

No secrets

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA BRIGGS

Elsbeth Sandys had already forgiven those who'd done her wrong. Writing her memoirs was more about forgiving herself. She talks to SARAH LANG.

Elsbeth Sandys admits she has terrible taste in men. The awarded author of novels, short stories, memoir and radio plays isn't referring to her first marriage of eight years (which ended fairly amicably) but to her second, 13-year marriage to actor Bruce Purchase and her subsequent eight-year marriage to literary great Maurice Shadbolt. The three men have since died, but the latter two crop up in Sandys' new memoir *Casting Off* (OUP, \$35). Sandys' son and daughter, who are close to their mother, didn't want to be written about, so she's written around them.

As honest and eloquent as her memoir of childhood *What Lies Beneath* (2014), *Casting Off* begins as Sandys marries aged 20 and becomes a theatre actor. She moved from Auckland to London aged 29, after her first divorce. There, as a jobbing actor, she met Purchase, a New Zealand-born character actor. Sandys doesn't try to 'write around' his misuse of money. 'Well, it did affect my life rather dramatically. His financial disasters were so outrageous and I was so naïve for so long.' In *Casting Off*, Sandys describes their decade living in a Cotswolds village (Ascott-u-Wychwood) that she dearly loved, and her regret at selling their home there (which she paid for) at Purchase's insistence. They split soon after, when Purchase admitted an affair and suggested he continue both relationships. Sandys threw up in the pub carpark. She also throws up when good news comes. 'Because it might go away.'

Casting Off ends when Sandys and Shadbolt begin a long-distance relationship (they met in England as friends). After 21 years in England, Sandys moved in with Shadbolt in Titirangi, West Auckland. There will be no third memoir, but Sandys knows many will treat her novel *Obsession* (Upstart Press, \$34.00) as just that. "You can't deny it, but these are echoes of my life, not retellings."

Published in March, it's an absorbing read about a well known, charismatic writer and hermit called Dick. Obsessed with his writing, his literary standing and his isolated house, he professes instant love for Tessa, moves her in, manipulates and undermines her, has multiple affairs, and eventually replaces her. Dick doesn't like women, but punishes them because he needs them. Meanwhile the narrator, a poet, loves Tessa. Sandys abandoned a draft of *Obsession* many years ago, then suddenly realised how to structure it. 'I couldn't really change the story, couldn't mute it or clean it up much. It just was.'

Shadbolt and Sandys split after eight years. 'He replaced me with Barbara Magner [then his ex-wife]. There was always a spare: someone he was keeping warm in case. What he needed from a woman, no woman could give: filling the hollows that made him desperately unhappy. I told him 'You should be a monk with an underground passage to get to the nuns, then return to being a monk.'

Shadbolt died in 2004 after suffering dementia. In 2005, Sandys returned to England for a year's writing residency. Considering staying, she applied for the British pension, to which you contribute weekly over your working life. 'Bruce had handled our finances, and I thought he was 'paying in' for my pension – I was usually the breadwinner – but he was only 'paying in' for his.' Her only option was suing Purchase. 'I said "It's pointless, he's always bankrupt."' With no pension to supplement her writing, she couldn't move back to Ascott-u-Wychwood.

Sick of Auckland, Sandys moved to Wellington eight years ago, mainly to be nearer her daughter. "Now I wouldn't live anywhere else in New Zealand." She lives in a small art-deco apartment in Mount Victoria, and enjoys the theatre and music.

A 'geographic schizophrenic,' she spends three or four months in the UK most years, seeing her son, friends, and literary agent. She hasn't had another relationship since Shadbolt, and doubts she will. 'I'm safe on my own. I don't trust myself with men. I yield too easily then I get resentful.' She thinks her relationships were affected by the 'screwed-up sexuality' of her adoptive mother, Alice Alley.

Madness ran in the Alley family. Alice's mother (also Alice Alley) was dragged around the backblocks by her bush-clearing husband Henry Alley. On 25 November 1897, Alice senior tried to drown herself and her six children in the river. She died with Rose, three weeks, and Lucy May, 18 months. The four eldest survived, including Alice, seven. Henry remarried and had 12 more children. Alice slaved as a nursemaid until she ran away aged 28, became a nurse, and eventually married much-older businessman Tom Somerville. The Dunedin couple adopted a son John, who Alice loved, then Elspeth, who Alice never pretended to love.

Elspeth's adored elderly father largely protected her from Alice's vitriol. Sandys thinks Alice had manic depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and possibly post-menopausal syndrome. 'There was a great shame around mental illness. My father's family said "Aunt Alice is just a bit strange."'

When Tom died, Elspeth was 14, John was at boarding school, and Alice was sicker. Each breakdown saw Alice go unwillingly to an asylum where she received electroconvulsive therapy, and sometimes tranquilisers. During her 'islands of reprieve' at home, Alice yelled 'Jezebel' at Elspeth if she spotted her in public, and burned Elspeth's 'disgusting' period-stained underpants. After Alice lunged at her with a knife, Elspeth jumped out a window and stayed with family friends for extended periods. Still, Elspeth lived on and off with her mother – and was under Alice's legal and financial control – until she married aged 20. In the absence of an agency like CYFS back

then, does she think an adult should have advocated for her? 'Yes, I do,' she says quietly.

Sandys doesn't blame her mother. 'I do forgive her. She was terribly sick.' Has she forgiven everyone? 'Everyone except Margaret Thatcher!' Does she ever think she's had very bad luck? 'Things have happened that made life very difficult. But I'm not in a refugee camp. Had I been brought up by my real mother, who everyone adored, I probably would have had a happy life, because I'm a very positive person. But then I probably wouldn't have written a word, because I think you write to understand or distract yourself from your life.' Motherhood brought great happiness. 'If I'd been more fertile, I'd probably have 12 children!'

Sandys knew nothing about her biological parents until her middle age. The search proved difficult, but eventually she discovered her birth mother's name. Betty James – who had married, without children – had died. But Sandys met her extended family. Sandys also visited her biological father Ken Tompkins once. His wife asked for no further contact.

In *What Lies Beneath*, Sandys imagines scenes and dialogue to fill the gaps around the facts surrounding her conception in New Plymouth. She imagines Ken (a family friend) taking Betty (just jilted by her fiancé) for a drive. The pair never met again. 'I'm the bad news my parents never wanted to hear,' Sandys writes. Ken was married with his third child due, and Betty was under intense financial and social pressure to adopt out the child. So 'Frances Hilton James' spent her first nine months in the Truby King Harris Hospital. Oddly, what Sandys discovered about the circumstances of her adoption closely resembled the adoption in her earlier novel *River Lines*.

Sandys has published nine novels and two short-story collections, and all but her earliest fiction draws from her life 'capital.' 'For me, there isn't a great difference between writing fiction and memoir.'

